

VIOLET VYVIAN

M.F.H.





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VIOLET VYVIAN

M. F. H.

BY

MAY CROMMELIN

AUTHOR OF 'QUEENIE,' 'BROWN EYES,' ETC.

AND

J. MORAY BROWN

AUTHOR OF 'SHIKAR SKETCHES,' 'POWDER, SPUR, AND SPEAR,' ETC.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

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VIOLET VYVIAN, M.F.H.

CHAPTER I.

IN THE MARSHWOOD VALE.

It was a dull, foggy evening in January as the London express pulled up with a snort at the small wayside station of Forde.

The indignant hiss of the engine seemed as if that most useful propeller somewhat resented being called upon to stop in its wild career at such a forlorn-looking spot.

‘Forde, Forde, Forde!’ yelled the one solitary porter, as if he thought it was a matter of vital importance for all the passengers in the train to know that they had arrived at the place.

‘Here! open this confounded door,’ was the only response he got, as a much-be-ulstered figure appeared at the door of a first-class smoking-carriage, vainly struggling with the handle. At last the said figure was released, and stepped out, followed by bags, hat-box, gun-case, etc., in fact, all the impedimenta and paraphernalia with which luxurious youth is wont now-a-days to travel. The guard’s whistle sounded, the engine gave a shriek and with a puff threw herself into her collar again (to use a coaching phrase), and soon the train disappeared round a curve of the line.

‘Pleaze, zur, be you fur Squire Bentley’s?’ inquired the solitary snipe of a porter; ‘’cos if you be, squire’s dog-cart be waitin’ fur you, and there be donkey-cart fur luggage.’

On receiving a reply in the affirmative from the passenger whom we have just seen alight, the intelligent porter asked him to point out his luggage, and while this difficult operation was being performed we will introduce our hero.

Jack Ramsay, for such was his name, was a

gunner—a Royal Horse Artillery gunner—and, as such, his looks and general appearance did no discredit to that smartest of all the smart branches of Her Majesty's service. Standing about six feet, his broad shoulders and lithe, muscular figure were surmounted by curly brown hair, regular, well-cut features, and a pair of keen, dark-grey eyes. He was clean-shaved, with the exception of a small, carefully-tended moustache that only partially concealed a firm yet pleasant-looking mouth—a mouth that could at times smile almost as sweetly as a woman's, and yet at others be compressed into a look of dogged determination that betokened its owner was not to be trifled with by man or beast.

Captain Jack Ramsay was some thirty years of age; he had been left fairly well off, and the cause of his visit to Forde was owing to an invitation from Squire Bentley, his godfather, and his dead father's old friend and college-chum, to come down and spend part of his leave with him, and hunt with the Marshwood Vale Hounds.

Jack's horses had come down a few days previously, and the 'solitary snipe,' in reply to his interrogations, informed him that they had arrived all safe and sound. The luggage having been duly collected and stowed away in the donkey-cart, Jack, after telling the boy in charge to 'shove that old moke along,' stepped into the dog-cart, and bowled away over the six miles of good road that separated him from his host's residence.

'How are you, my dear boy? God bless me, you are much altered since I saw you last, but how well you look! How like your dear father,' said the cheery old squire, as he welcomed Jack with outstretched hands, and turned him round under the lamp in the hall, while he gazed affectionately and earnestly into his face. 'What a silly old fool I am!' he added, as Jack divested himself of his wrapper; 'here I am, forgetting you have had a long journey and a cold drive. Come in, and warm yourself, and then we'll have dinner;' and, saying this, he pushed Jack into a snug bachelor's sanctum, where a wood and coal fire shed a

cheerful glow on the thick Turkey carpet, and dispensed a genial warmth around.

A few moments of conversation ensued with inquiries about his horses on Jack's part, and then, lighting a candle, the old gentleman showed him up to his bed-room.

Dinner discussed, the two men adjourned for a smoke to the squire's sanctum, and then Jack inquired,

‘By-the-by, squire, I am almost ashamed to ask the question, but who has the Marshwood Vale Hounds now? I know old Vyvian died last year, but out in that infernal country, Egypt, one hadn't much chance of being posted in what was going on at home, much less as to the doings of the sporting world.’

‘Oh! we've a capital master,’ was the reply; and then the squire's pipe evidently wanted particular attention, for he puffed and sucked at it vigorously.

‘But what is his name?’ persisted Jack.

‘Name, name? oh! same name.’

‘What—Vyvian?’

‘Yes, yes; of course, of course; but I'll

introduce you to-morrow. By-the-by, that is a very nice brown mare of yours; where did you get her?’

‘Yes, she is—“Brenda” by “Baromite.” She was bred down here in your west-country, and I picked her up for a mere song.’

So the conversation drifted on to the subject of horses, and the old squire walked round the room, candle in hand, descanting on the merits of old favourite dead and gone hunters, whose portraits adorned his walls. Now he told how this horse carried him over twenty feet of water, how another pounded the whole field over ‘that big double,’ anon how this bay horse was ‘as clever as a cat,’ and that chestnut could ‘stay for a week;’ and so on, with a certain prosiness and reiteration that might have proved wearisome to one less keen and interested in sport than his listener.

At last, however, when the night was well advanced, they separated; but not before Jack had lit one last pipe and walked round to the stables to see his horses.

Jack’s groom was waiting for him, and in

reply to his query, 'Horses all right, Evans?' touched his cap and replied, 'Yes, sir, as right as nails.'

The stud occupied a range of three good, roomy, loose-boxes, and were standing littered up to their hocks in nice, clean, wheat straw; for the squire was a staunch old Tory, and like a true sportsman took good care that any horse as well as man who partook of his hospitality, was well treated.

The occupant of the first box was the aforesaid 'Brenda,' a large, powerful, well-bred mare, with good sloping shoulders, clean flat legs, game, lean, well-set-on head and neck, and hocks and quarters that looked like going through dirt. Her nostril was large and red, whilst her clear bright eye, and satin-like coat, betokened her in the best of health and condition. As her master approached her with a playful slap on the quarter, and a 'How are you, old lady?' she turned and rubbed her velvety muzzle against him, as if in response, showing that they were both on those terms, viz., the very best, that should exist between man and

horse, particularly when the former entrusts his neck many times a day to the safe keeping of the latter. Box No. 2 contained a fine, up-standing, black horse, much of the same stamp, but not showing quite so much quality as the mare; in fact, more of a weight-carrier. His name was 'Erebus.' The last box was tenanted by a bright, hog-maned bay, what at a first glance one would almost feel inclined to designate a pony. But, though standing barely fifteen hands, he was a pocket Hercules. He was a bit cobby, but when his wonderful, sloping shoulders, strong back and loins, great powerful hocks, thighs, and gaskins, deep back ribs, and the great depth through his heart was noticed, he had all the appearance of a sixteen-three, weight-carrying hunter, in miniature. As his master turned up his rug, he made a playful snap at him, but 'Come, come, old man, none of your nonsense!' seemed to reassure him, for he pricked his ears and turned his head as if to inquire if his services would be required on the morrow. He was his master's favourite, and rejoiced in the name of

‘Harlequin,’ by ‘The Clown’ out of ‘Columbine,’ and was about as well-bred as he could be.

The following morning saw Jack and his host attired in all the splendour of pink coats, top-boots, and snowy breeches, en route to meet the Marshwood Vale Hounds at one of their best fixtures, to wit, Blackbrook Bridge. It was the perfection of a hunting morning. A gentle rain had fallen during the night, the large, spreading pastures were all damp, and every branch and twig on the trees and hedges had its dependent drop of moisture. Heavy clouds were rolling along overhead, through which every now and then the sun shone out, only again to be temporarily obscured, while a faint breeze just stirred the tops of the now leafless trees.

‘By-the-by, squire,’ began Jack, ‘you never told me who was the present Master of the Marshwood Hounds last night. Is he any relation to the late one?’

‘Yes, a very near one,’ was the reply; ‘but I’ll introduce you; in the meantime we had

better jog on ;' and, suiting the action to the word, he put the powerful weight-carrier he was riding into a good, round trot, and so Jack was again baffled in his inquiries.

A couple or so of miles brought them to the meet, an old stone bridge spanning the dark, sluggish stream known as the Slack—a stream well-known to members of the Marshwood Vale Hunt, and of which rumour related that enough whips, spurs, and stirrup-irons reposed in its muddy bottom to stock any ordinary saddler's shop. The hounds, attended by the Hunt servants, were walking about in an adjoining field, in which, also, were grouped several knots of sportsmen, whilst a string of carriages, from the pair-horse landau down to the more humble polo-cart and farmer's gig, denoted that Blackbrook Bridge was a favourite fixture.

As the squire and Jack made their way through the crowd, and turned into the field, a tandem, composed of two smart-looking cobs, and driven by a nice-looking girl, with another lady sitting beside her, pulled up. As they did so, every hat was raised ; and in less than no time

a fine, symmetrical, well-bred bay horse, carrying a side-saddle, was brought up to the near side of the cart. The fair charioteer, throwing off her ulster, sprang lightly into the saddle, and gathering up her reins, after having her habit adjusted, moved on to make way for her companion, who followed her example. Both ladies were attired in faultlessly-cut habits, no doubt the work of that great maestro in such habiliments, Mr. Busvine, and wore scarlet jackets, open at the throat and showing a clean, well-starched white tie, secured by a small, diamond, horse-shoe pin. The younger and fairer of the two wore a black velvet hunting-cap, and this, with the horn at her saddle, made Jack open his eyes. She was a pleasant-faced girl with a good figure, wavy brown hair, and large grey eyes that looked you in the face with a true, straight, and honest glance; whilst her complexion was of that tint of which Englishwomen are so justly proud, and denoted her country-born and bred.

As she rode into the field, the pack caught sight of her, and, breaking away from the

Hunt servants, came tumbling and towling along in their eagerness to welcome the well-known figure. Some jumped at her horse's nose, nearly all were pawing at her, whilst one old veteran sprang so high that he nearly landed in the rider's lap, and, falling back, left great muddy paw-marks all down the previously unspotted habit. No rate or punishment did the old hound get, however, from those fair lips, only a 'Gently, Contest, gently, old man;' and then a piece of biscuit was thrown him, which he caught dexterously. As the Hunt servants came up and lifted their caps, they all received a courteous greeting, and, after a few minutes spent in conversation, old Tom Harkholler, the huntsman, got the pack round him; then with a 'Hounds, please, gen'men!' from the first whip, they moved off to draw.

'Come along, my boy, and I'll introduce you to the new master,' whispered the old squire, with a chuckle to Jack, who was sitting on his horse staring in open-mouthed astonishment at this new departure in the customs of the hunting-field. As they ranged up alongside the

wearer of the hunting-cap, she extended a hand to the old man, saying,

‘Oh, I’m so glad you’ve come out to-day, squire, for I’m sure we will have a good run.’

‘*You* always bring us good luck, Miss Vyvian,’ was the old gentleman’s gallant reply; ‘but pray let me introduce my friend Captain Ramsay to you—my godson and a thorough sportsman,’ he added sotto voce.

The introduction over, they fell back, and on the way to covert the following conversation ensued :

‘Well, Jack, what do you think of the new master?’

‘Come, squire, you’re chaffing me. I suppose Miss Vyvian is the master’s daughter?’

‘Yes, she was.’

‘Was! what do you mean?’

‘What I say,’ was the calm rejoinder. ‘Violet Vyvian is old Vane Vyvian’s daughter; as he died more than a year ago, he can’t be master now! But I won’t mystify you any longer, but tell you the whole story. Poor old Vane, though the best fellow in the world, was a

bit eccentric, as you may have heard. He had two great passions in life : his only child Violet, and his hounds. He had a great horror of impecuniosity, and so when his will was read it was found to contain these provisions :

‘Firstly: That Violet should not marry anyone unless he was the possessor of a title and good income. In the event of her disregarding this wish of her father’s, the whole of the property was to go to her cousin (Cyril Vyvian—whom I’ll point out to you presently), except five hundred pounds a year, which was to be Violet’s under any circumstances,

‘Secondly: That she, or whoever succeeded to the Forde Manor estates, should maintain in an efficient manner the Marshwood Vale Hounds, without any subscription, and provide for the Hunt servants should they be injured or incapacitated by accident or old age from continuing to discharge their duties in the field. Well, Violet, whom I have known from a child, is now M.F.H., and well she fills the position. She knows more about hunting than most *men*; the hounds will fly to a mere touch of her horn; she rides as

straight as a line, and though she is such a gentle-looking little woman, I can tell you it would be a brave man who would in our country dare to press on, or over-ride hounds, or treat her in any but a respectful manner; for if he did, Miss Vi, in a very few but very quiet words, would make him "feel his position acutely," as the reporters have it. With all this she is not a bit fast or slangy, and there isn't a man, woman, or child for miles round that doesn't swear by Miss Violet. There now, I've told you all about our master; only, for goodness sake, don't go tumbling head-over-ears in love with her, for as you are not a lord it would be useless.'

CHAPTER II.

GONE AWAY!

THE hounds had now turned off the road through a gate, and across a couple of grass fields till they reached a large square-shaped covert of some thirty acres, composed of oaks and hazel, with a thick undergrowth of brambles and large tussocks of grass. This was just such a place as a repose-loving fox would select to take his ease in. Castle Wood, for such was the name of the covert, had a reputation for being a sure find, and on this occasion it kept up its reputation, as we shall see presently. Tom had sixteen-couple of dog-hounds out, and he pulled up for a moment waiting for Violet's signal to throw

the pack into covert. In the meanwhile, one whipper-in had slipped through a little hunting wicket, and scuttled down a drive to the far end of the wood, whilst the other had cantered away to the right, to take up another point of observation.

The hounds were all packed together, looking up in old Tom's face, with waving sterns and that eagerness to be at their natural foe depicted on each canine countenance, which showed them to be a pack of hounds well hunted and having had plenty of blood.

The field was not a large one, some fifty all told, perhaps; and Violet, after looking round and seeing that everyone was drawn up at one side of the covert, gave a nod to Tom, who in his turn raised his whip-hand, and with a 'Leu in there, my lads!' waved the pack in. In a moment not a hound was at his horses' heels as they dashed into covert almost with a cry, but which was restrained to a whimper, making the wattle fence which bounded the wood crash and crackle from the impetus of their charge. With a 'Come hup, 'oss!' Tom jumped in after them,

whilst Violet cantered away to a gate and through it also entered the covert, and soon she and Tom were lost to sight.

Whilst they are finding their fox, let us take a look round at the country, and make the acquaintance of the members of the Hunt.

The country was not a fashionable one, lying as it did out of the beaten track of those sportsmen who rush about hither and thither from town, hunting now with this pack, now with that, and giving little or nothing towards the maintenance of the particular pack they deign to favour with their august presence. It is men of this kind who make fox-hunting unpopular with a certain class, if it is so in any country. Farmers, as a rule, even if they do not hunt themselves (and, alas! in these days of Radicalism and bad prices, comparatively few can afford to do so), do not object to any slight damage being done on their farms, provided it is done by sportsmen residing in the country—men who give them a helping hand by buying their forage from them, etc., and whom they know and constantly meet. Farmer Giles does not object

to a gate being smashed by Squire So-and-so, knowing he will probably express his regret at the accident and send him a sovereign to replace it; but when Mr. Perks of London does likewise, and not only does *not* express any regret, but plentifully bespatters the aggrieved owner with abuse and foul language for locking the said gate—why, then the worm turns, and ‘dang thick fox-hunting!’ is the thought uppermost in the bucolic mind. If fox-hunting is to flourish,—which heaven grant it may for many a year to come,—consideration *must* be shown for the agricultural element.

The Marshwood Vale country was a wild and sparsely populated one. A good deal of grass, comparatively little arable land, and wide stretches of down and heather gave that undulating character to the scenery so much more pleasing to the eye than a dead flat. The coverts were mostly big woodlands and large straggling gorses on the sides of the hills. In a dry season these downs, being mostly chalk, carried but a poor scent, but given a good soaking of rain, hounds could fly along at a pace

that made even a thoroughbred do his level best to keep on terms with them. The vale part of the country was stiffly enclosed, the fences being mostly big, straggling, hairy doubles, with a ditch on each side big enough, in many cases, to engulf horse and rider, should the former make a mistake, whilst when newly cut and laid, the 'plushers' were strong enough to turn over almost an elephant. There were a few flying fences, a fair quantity of timber (generally of a very stiff description), whilst the hills that encircled the country were the watershed of numerous streams which, when they reached the lower level, presented formidable obstacles, and required not only a bold but a clever horse to negotiate with safety and success.

The district immediately surrounding Castle Wood was one that could not fail to gladden a sportsman's eye. Fairly big, rush grown, badly-drained pastures, with only here and there an arable field, cropping out like a brown island from a sea of green, gave promise of a holding scent; and the forbidding character of the fences

made it plain that the man and horse who would really be *with* hounds must be possessed not only of nerve and determination, but that these qualities should be combined with discretion and judgment. Some five miles distant a gentle slope led upwards towards a gorse and rock bestrewn range of downs, the sides of which were seamed by dark lines denoting the course of some of the streams on their way to lower ground. These 'goyles,' as they were termed, often proved a 'stopper' to the field. Too wide and too much protected by dwarf timber on either bank to be jumped, they necessitated a scramble in and out; and a rash horse, in attempting this, often brought himself and his rider to ignominious grief.

Beyond these hills again lay the sea, glimpses of which could occasionally be descried where an opening or gap in the range permitted. Take it all round it was what is called a rough country, but a decidedly sporting one.

Now for our field. That lady on a well-bred chestnut mare, surrounded by a knot of admirers, is Mrs. O'Brien (wife of Rufus O'Brien),

and was the lady who had driven over with Violet to the meet. She was tall, with a fine figure, which her well-cut scarlet jacket fitted to perfection, and with masses of dark, somewhat coarse black hair plaited and pinned in large coils at the back of the head. Keen, flashing black eyes that now looked bold, now languishing; a pale olive skin which, when excited or heated, was suffused by a warm rich tint of crimson; the whole set off by a faultlessly-cut habit, made her a prominent figure, and one at which a stranger would naturally cast more than one glance. She sat her horse square and straight, and in fact the whole turnout made a handsome picture. When hounds ran, Mrs. O'Brien was always 'there or thereabouts;' and, though she undoubtedly did ride well, many were the tales of the jealousy she exhibited if ever deprived of her pride of place.

Talking to her in a very *empressé* and devoted manner was Cyril Vyvian, a small, neat, sandy-haired man. Weak and ordinary-looking would be the casual observer's verdict on him, but weak though he undoubtedly was, he

had his good points—a warm, though too impressionable heart, moved hither and thither by the caprice and feeling of the moment, always *wanting* to do right, but with barely strength enough of character to follow the dictates of his conscience.

That big, red-haired, red-bearded, blue-eyed man on foot, tightening his horse's girths, is Rufus O'Brien. When Violet was left an orphan, she invited her old school-friend Kate O'Brien and her husband to come and take up their abode at Forde Manor. Rufus, it was agreed, should look after the kennel and stable arrangements generally, whilst Kate was to act the part of chaperon. A good fellow in every sense was Rufus, and liked equally by men and women, for his hearty, jovial manner and keen, sparkling blue eyes had a ring of honesty about them that proved irresistible to both sexes. A sportsman he was, every inch, and his weather-defying garments, though well-cut and well-made, were devoid of any dandyism. He, like most members of the Marshwood Vale Hunt who sported pink—and they only numbered

some dozen or so—encased his upper man in a huntsman's cut coat, and, in virtue of his position as Master of the Horse, etc., wore a velvet hunting-cap. His horse, too, looked a 'wear-and-tear' sort of animal, and, like his master, hailed from the Emerald Isle—a big, muscular chestnut, with a Roman nose and great ragged hips, but with immense power and those drooping quarters that so many Irish horses have, yet possessing all the points for galloping and staying that are necessary to a hunter.

Talking to him is *the* hard-riding farmer of the Hunt, a mere boy to look at, though some forty summers have passed over his head. Ted Pile his friends call him, and any horse that *he* gets on, *has* to go *nolens volens*. A lightweight, and with the best of hands, he can shove a sticky horse along, or let a bold one go, with the best, and it is a treat to see him handling a raw young four-year-old over a bit of stiff timber, or screwing him over a big double under the branch of an overhanging tree. He possesses those two very necessary adjuncts to

a really good horseman, viz., nerves of iron, unflinching determination, and a sweet, very sweet temper.

A little detached from the group, puffing a cigar in moody silence, sits the great gun of the Hunt, Lord Guisard. He is the largest land-owner in the country, and, from his self-satisfied appearance, evidently considers himself a sort of small deity, only existing to be worshipped by his more humble fellows. He has his good points, undoubtedly, if one could only find them out; but, alas! few, if any, people have as yet been honestly able to accomplish that difficult feat! His appearance is certainly against him. A pale, pasty complexion, surmounted by hair the colour of well-bleached flax, and a scrubby moustache that he was incessantly nibbling and biting at when not better employed,—added to small pig-like eyes that never looked one straight in the face, and a somewhat corpulent figure with large, flabby, coarse hands and feet,—did not make him bear out the character of an Adonis, for which he fain would pose. Ride he certainly can, in a certain way, for he has little

fear, but the less said about his judgment, or thought for the good horse he rides, the better. In fact, he looks on a horse as merely a machine to carry his lordly person.

Near him, chattering 'twenty to the dozen,' are Mr. and Mrs. Blatherwick, two well-known members of the Hunt. Mr. Blatherwick had spent his early life in the colonies, where he is supposed to have amassed a fair fortune. 'Old B.,' as he is generally called, is a very good fellow in his way, but, as far as hunting is concerned, an arrant humbug. On a road, or through a line of gates, he is a *capital* man! but, when a fence appears, he invariably has some excuse for turning away from hounds—he has either 'Lost a shoe!' or 'Must look for Mrs. B., confound it all!'

Mrs. B. equals her husband in leading the gallop in the excuse department. 'Dear me! so disappointing, you know; we had a capital start, and saw every yard of the run, but unfortunately, just before you killed, my poor dear horse stubbed himself,' etc. etc., Mrs. B. would say all the time, she never having given

the said horse a chance of stubbing himself! Then to hear her at a check on a bad scenting day was a treat. 'O! Lord Guisard, *did* you see my dear old horse jump that gate? I thought he would *never* come down, he jumped so high!' The said gate having been unhung, and laid flat on the ground! However, they were very harmless people, and barring hustling at a gap, and occasionally heading a fox, did but little harm; being very hospitably inclined, and glad to 'walk' a couple of puppies for the Hunt, they were not the worst members of it.

One or two neighbouring squires, a few farmers, a hard-riding vet. on a weedy thoroughbred (all in a lather, already!) and some three or four officers from the adjacent barracks at Slushborough, make up the field.

But all this time hounds have been drawing steadily through the thick and tangled undergrowth of Castle Wood. At last, however, one hound throws his tongue. 'Huic to Trickster! huic!' rings out old Tom's cheer, and the next moment the chorus is taken up by the pack. One ring round the covert they take, awaken-

ing the echoes, sending pheasants soaring away over the tree-tops, and disturbing a colony of jays that flit screaming about; then a dead silence for a moment, and then from round the corner of the covert came a soft 'tweet, tweet, tweet!' It was Violet's horn. Hounds fly to her, and Jack, settling himself in his saddle, hustled his horse for a start. As he rounded the corner through an open gate he saw Violet cheering some four couple of hounds on the line, while the rest of the pack came tumbling out of covert, straining every muscle to catch up their flying comrades. There was a rare scent, and hounds drove along at a good pace. The fence at the end of the field was a big uncompromising looking double, and as she approached it Violet pulled her horse into a trot, and dropped her hands. The clever animal she rode lit lightly on the top, paused between the newly-laid plushers for an instant, and then bounded off, over the ditch on the far side, and was sailing away again in his stride in a moment. Jack followed suit, and then came old Tom, Rufus, Kate, and several others, all negotiating

the place safely except the vet., whose impetuous screw went at it forty miles an hour, and came to grief in consequence. In this order they sailed on over some dozen fields, Violet leading, for do what he would, and though horribly put out at being led by a woman, Jack could not diminish the distance between them, and he had too much regard for his horse, and too much judgment to push it unnecessarily. At last they come to a piece of plough, a swede field, in which some sheep were hurdled; this brings hounds' noses down, and affords a welcome relief to the field, the stout division of which are beginning to pant and mop their brows.

Tom does not attempt to cast his hounds, but lets them try for themselves. At last, however, seeing that the sheep have so foiled the line that the hounds could make nothing of it, he caught hold of them and galloped forward. Directly they got on grass again, 'Denmark,' a large tan hound, lashed his stern as he feathered down the side of a fence, and a moment after threw his tongue decisively. Away they all streamed. They had now entered a wild snipey-

looking bit of country, and were nearing the hills which stood out clear and distinct only some three miles distant. This was evidently the fox's point, and between it and him not a covert intervened. 'Forrard, forrard!' screamed old Tom, though hounds were running as hard as they could, too fast for much music. After another mile or so, the field began to tail considerably, and was confined to Violet, Kate O'Brien, Rufus, Jack, and some half-dozen more. Lord Guisard had been deposited in a ditch, from the bottom of which he was endeavouring to extricate his horse, with many curses and blows showered on the luckless animal. Violet had now resigned the lead, which was alternately taken by Jack and Rufus, and so they went on, now topping a double, now flying a smaller fence, and anon popping over a bit of timber in a corner. Violet, however, was well to the fore, and the more he saw of her the more attracted to her Jack became. She rode so gracefully, there was no flurry or fuss about her, and she and her horse seemed only to be cantering, whilst they made light of

every fence ; in fact, her whole bearing was so quiet and unostentatious, and yet so *sporting*, that few seeing her could withhold a tribute of admiration.

They had topped a gently-undulating piece of ground which fell somewhat more abruptly on the far side, and at the bottom a tell-tale line of willows betokened the presence of water. As hounds splashed in and scrambled out, sending the spray flying in showers, Jack, who was lying third, muttered against his better judgment, which told him he ought to shut off steam going down hill,

‘ Hang it all, I am not going to be led over this. Come along, old woman !’ and, shaking up Brenda, he rushed past Violet and Rufus.

‘ Keep to your right,’ shouted out the latter as Ramsay shot past him, at the same time pulling away in that direction himself. But the warning came too late. It was a big jump, some sixteen feet of clear open water with rotten banks, and though the good mare was fully capable of accomplishing this, as she took off, the undermined rotten bank gave way beneath

her weight ; she made her spring and did her best, but alas ! she and her rider went souse into the muddy depths of the stream ! They did not part company, however, and soon managed to scramble out on the right side, as Violet, Rufus, and the Hunt-servants flew the brook a little lower down ; though, of course, Jack lost ground by the mishap. Others availed themselves of a well-known ford, and all soon were re-united.

On the hounds went, and nearer and nearer they approached the foot of the hills. ‘Yonder he goes!’ screamed old Tom, as he caught sight of a little draggled brown form struggling up the hillside with a couple of magpies hovering and chattering above him ; and sticking spurs to his horse, with a couple of blasts of his horn, he lifted hounds and galloped on. He was too late, however. Careless stopping had left *one* earth open, and into this friendly shelter the now well-nigh beaten fox disappeared with the hounds almost at his brush.

A six-mile point, almost straight, and run in thirty minutes, the time-keepers of the Hunt made it, and ‘a capital gallop,’ was the verdict

of everyone—particularly the Blatherwicks, who made their appearance shortly afterwards, having found a convenient line of gates and lanes.

‘I hope you won’t be any the worse for your ducking,’ remarked Rufus to our hero; ‘have one of my weeds, yours must be soaked,’ he added, as he saw Jack turning over the contents of his sodden cigar-case.

‘Oh! no, thanks,’ was the cheery reply. ‘I don’t think we shall be much the worse; but I’ll gladly avail myself of your offer, for this moist ’baccy of mine is not much good. However, I think I’ll get home and change as soon as I can. How far is it to Mr. Bentley’s?’ he inquired, as Rufus struck a fusee and offered it to him.

‘Only about eight miles. You see that clump of trees yonder; when you get there you’ll find a lane by a little stream—follow the course of the water till you come to the village of Hawkhurst, and then anyone will tell you the way. By-the-bye, Miss Vyvian has told me to ask you and the squire to come and dine at Forde Manor this day week. Can you come?’

If so, she will send you a formal invitation.'

'Thanks, I shall be delighted if Mr. Bentley has no other engagement,' returned Jack; and, the weed being lit, he remounted his horse, lifted his hat to Miss Vyvian, and set off to find his way home.

In the meantime, it has been decided not to attempt to dig the fox; the good run he has afforded and the straightness of his course having, in Violet's eyes, ensured his life being spared, in the hopes that he may on some future day afford the Marshwood Vale Hounds another good run.

So hounds move off in one direction to find another fox, while Jack disappears in another, and soon all is still in the vicinity of the earth, save the 'pee-wit, pee-wit!' of the plover as he wheels and dashes about in fantastic flight calling to his fellows, and the distant thunder of the surf as it breaks on the beach far away.

Had any of the field, however, elected to stay and watch the spot, they would, as the shades of evening fell, have seen a pointed black nose gradually protrude from the earth,

shortly followed by the body of the ‘little red rascal,’ who, after giving himself a shake, and having a look round to see the coast was clear. set off on his homeward travels. That night he slept at Compton Gorse, and the following day found him back in his old quarters at Castle Wood, from which doubtless he will afford the Marshwood Vale Hounds another good run ere the ‘whoo-whoop’ resounds over him, and he becomes ‘a hundred tatters of brown.’

CHAPTER III.

FIRST IMPRESSIONS.

THE evening had come on which Jack Ramsay was bidden to dine with the M.F.H. of the Marshwood Vale Hounds. At a quarter to eight the drawing-room at Forde Manor presented a pleasant, nay, even picturesque scene. The walls, that were wainscoted right up to the ceiling in panels decorated with floral wreaths, had once on a time been painted cream-white, as was also the high, carved, wooden chimney-piece. This barbarism of some dead Vyvian of Georgian days was to be excused by the charming background that it made to the bright dresses of the guests, thrown up still more by

the subdued neutral tints with which the room was upholstered in silk of apparently a century's age, and of the dull olive-green carpet. Modern taste was gratified by tall palms mounted on handsome china stands, softly rounding the angles of the large room with their drooping fronds, and by the most luxurious of easy lounges and sofas mixed with the severe Chipendale furniture of bygone days, such as high, old-fashioned screens and matchless, inlaid, corner cupboards, behind the glass doors whereof generations of Vyvian dames had jealously guarded their treasures of Chelsea and Bow, Wedgewood and old Dresden.

Yes, it was a pretty scene. All the members of the Hunt wore pink evening coats with green collars, the uniform of the Marshwood Vale, while on their brass buttons an M. V. in plain letters stood out distinct and legible. They were wont to declare that *they* were strictly conservative, and would not follow the fashion of having writhing hieroglyphics for their escutcheon, that no one could decipher without difficulty. As the portly squires with their

wives in best dresses of last season's London visit, and fresh-faced younger men with pretty sisters came in, Violet Vyvian received them each and all with the frank smile and winning manner that made her such a favourite in the county.

As guests passed on, Rufus O'Brien gave them a second reception with a great hand-clasp that engulfed women's fingers and drove their rings into the flesh. Yet even that sourest of dowagers, old Lady Guisard, could not look angry with his sunny blue eyes smiling down on her, while the most hospitable loud welcomes were poured forth, with the 'least taste in life' of Irish accent, straight from his honest heart.

Mrs. O'Brien stood studiously a little aloof. The in-comers had rather to seek her out; it was not her *rôle* to interfere with either the mistress or major-domo of Forde Manor. She would not 'put herself forward for the old women to carp at her,' she confided with a low laugh to those of the younger men who sought to know the cause of this modesty. Yet to some of these, her admirers, who got a swift flashing glance

out of her glorious black eyes and a soft lingering pressure of her hand, Kate O'Brien's part in their greeting was, though last, not *quite* least.

There was a bodyguard of three or four stout old squires round Violet. They all thought it their duty to devote themselves to their young hostess, and apparently believed she must equally enjoy their society on all occasions; besides, as 'none of the young fellows could have her,' why should they scruple to monopolise her?

'Hallo!' remarked one of these, presently, 'here's some one in a black coat coming in. A stranger, eh? and a very good-looking fellow, too.'

'By gad, he is,' muttered another old gentleman, in a low voice, as Ramsay—for he was the new-comer—approached.

Even as he came up the long room, Violet was conscious of a pleasurable thrill as she watched that tall, symmetrical figure. True, his coat was like that of the vicar, the Rev. Jack Wood, a black blot on the otherwise bright aspect of the groups: but that helped to make him appear the more distinguished. She

liked his looks, manly, straight, and strong ; and she liked, too, his erect carriage and decided step. Some of the younger men, traversing that long expanse of drawing-room alone, had felt shy and shown it ; some affected this style, others that. Her fastidious mind inwardly criticised them all : the jovial sporting ones, the thinner languid lady-killers, brisk, dapper, little men who sang and gave themselves airs, and those who, with good looks and means, preferred stables and smoking-rooms, clubs, and their own comfort to women's sweetest witcheries. She knew them all, or thought so. But here was a new type.

‘ He is very handsome, and he must know it ; but he does not seem to think much about it,’ was Violet’s mental verdict, looking up at Jack Ramsay’s clean-cut features, tanned brown by much outdoor life, and meeting full a keen, clear glance out of his dark-grey eyes.

She was right enough : Jack knew that women’s glances, and those of some of his own sex, too, often turned admiringly upon him. But there was a lurking smile under his mous-

tache, which last was a shade lighter than his brown, wavy, though close-clipped hair, and it seemed to hint he was ready to laugh at any woman who said his features were like the ‘Dying Gladiator,’ or a Greek god; to laugh heartily at himself, too, if he were coxcombical enough to feel vain of such a matter of chance as a straight nose.

The young man’s own thoughts, as Violet greeted him, were: ‘Frank and honest in her manner; and not above being winning, too. She is no Venus, but a nice-looking girl all the same. I like that waving brown hair so prettily drawn up to the top of her head, and she looks good style and well turned-out altogether, as a hunting-woman should.’ Miss Vyvian’s white satin bodice and tulle skirt became her figure, certainly, to perfection; and a very good figure it was.

‘You will find an old friend of yours here, Captain Ramsay—indeed, a cousin, I believe,’ said Violet, brightly. ‘Mrs. Beaumont is my near neighbour, and she is one of my greatest friends.’

She looked round to where Jack saw a dear and familiar face of his boyhood's days smiling at him. This was that of an elder cousin, now a widow, who lived at Littleforde, a pleasant, small house just outside the park wall of Forde Manor.

He made straight for her.

'Well, Margaret, *how* are you?'

'Well, Jack, welcome to Marshwood Vale.'
(They had not met for eight years.)

'I am very glad to see you again, You are not changed in the least since I saw you last,' said the young man, warmly; looking with friendly admiration into Margaret Beaumont's face, that was still as delicately pretty as he remembered it, though she was in her 'thirties,' while her reddish-gold hair was as thick and her brown eyes as bright as ever.

'I cannot say the same of you,' she replied, with a soft, flattered smile showing she owned still to woman's special weakness. 'You were a raw recruit then, and so shy. But I have a scolding for you already! I am quite hurt that you should have come down to see the Marsh-

wood Vale Hounds, and not be staying with me.'

'Your scoldings always used to have something nice wrapped up in them : I remember that as a little chap. Well—but, you see, Squire Bentley asked me down here. He is my god-father, you know, and has always been very kind to me.'

'I'll forgive you, then, if you promise to come to me afterwards, and to stay as long as you like,' said Mrs. Beaumont, gently. She was a very affectionate woman, and always yearned after her own people, few of whom were left alive. 'You always used to look upon me as an elder sister, you know, Jack, so I hope you have not changed. And, really, I have fair stables and can put up your horses and groom quite easily,' she added, with a trifle of anxiety lest Jack should be inwardly afraid of a widow's ménage, bad wine, a pampered coachman, and mysteriously vanishing oats and hay.

Jack laughed.

'I am pretty certain of that. Report has already told me you have a model establishment, my dear Margaret. Yes, I shall be delighted

if I may transfer myself and my belongings to Littleforde, after my fortnight with Mr. Bentley is up. It is just like your old self to ask me so kindly.'

He was interrupted by a general movement to dinner, and found himself allotted to take in Mrs. O'Brien.

Miss Vyvian's dinner-table reflected as much credit on that young lady's administrative capacity, as did the management of her hounds, and the whole appearance of the fine old home she had inherited from generations of ancestors. Ramsay's eyes examined the whole appointments of the table: the silver, glass, flowers; wandered to the full-length, be-ruffed and be-wigged portraits that were let into the pannelled walls; and settled longer with calm satisfaction on the menu.

'All good, very good,' he thought to himself. 'By Jove! she must be a clever girl.' Violet's situation interested him; he was curious to see if she managed her affairs, or was controlled by them against her will; whether she was a figure-head, or a pilot of her own ship. Now, she was

sitting at the head of her table, and listening with as highly good-humoured a smile alternately to Lord Guisard's inanities on her right hand, and the hoarse whisper of a stone-deaf old gentleman, the father of the Hunt, on her left, as if they were the wittiest and handsomest people present.

But Ramsay's observations had to be made very briefly and at stolen intervals, his whole attention being promptly challenged by Mrs O'Brien.

'I am quite sorry, Captain Ramsay, that you should not have been allowed to take down your cousin, Mrs. Beaumont, this first night, instead of such an insignificant person as myself,' she murmured, with a soft flash of her large black eyes. 'It would have been so much pleasanter for you. She is so pretty, is she not? Miss Vyvian and I are so fond of her; our dear Peggy, as I call her.'

'I can hardly imagine anything pleasanter than the present arrangement,' cheerfully returned Ramsay, as in duty bound. But his soft speeches had generally a spice of amusement

in them that might turn to ridicule if the situation became at all sentimental. 'May I ask in what way Mrs. O'Brien can consider herself a nobody.'

'Really, my part in this household is such a small one. Miss Vyvian—she is an heiress, you know, though bound, alas! by most tiresome conditions of a will—she is the sweetest girl in the world and so clever. Then my husband is her major-domo, looks after her hounds——'

'And chooses her wine, I should think. He deserves our thanks for his excellent judgment,' put in Ramsay, who had just put down his glass with inward gusto.

'Ah!—I wish—I wish my husband did not know quite so much about wine. But, of course, that is from a wife's point of view,' said Kate low, while her beautiful eyes became downcast a moment and the faintest of little sighs escaped her. Ramsay thought he had better change the subject; so he asked,

'And what is your share in this most charming establishment? Whatever it is, I am sure it

is well done, to judge by the results everywhere around us.'

'I—O! I am Miss Vyvian's duenna.' The words left Mrs. O'Brien's lips so artlessly, yet were accompanied by such a killing glance straight and full out of her dark eyes, that Jack fairly burst out laughing, being tickled at the idea. Then, on being pettishly reproved for his rudeness, he gravely apologised, explaining :

'You seem so young for such a responsible post. I should say you cannot be very much older than Miss Vyvian herself.'

'Why, I am younger, I believe, some months younger,' Mrs. O'Brien innocently hastened to reply (though in this her memory misled her, as it does many women). 'We were school-fellows, and the dearest of friends; but as to age, being married, you see, makes all the difference.'

'I see;' Jack looked with an air of fervent faith into Kate's beautiful face. She was like a tropical flower, he thought, with her dusky hair, perhaps somewhat coarse and unbright-

ened by any gloss, but piled in masses on her head. Her somewhat olive skin was tinged warmly as a ripe peach, while the faintest *soupeçon* of down marked a line above her scarlet lips. But the chief features in her face were her great lustrous eyes, that sometimes flashed upon one unawares with wonderful light. They turned on Ramsay slowly and full now, and seemed to draw his gaze into their own depths and seek to hold it fast.

Rousing himself from the spell, for Jack was no schoolboy in such books as women's looks, he became aware that a man was watching them covertly across the table.

The man's gaze was so intent and jealous, although instantly dropped on becoming aware of Ramsay's notice, that the latter felt curious, and gave him as scrutinizing a glance in return. He was a rather small individual, with the fair hair, reddish moustache, and ordinary blue eyes so common with a certain type of Englishmen; one might easily see a dozen of them in a day, fairly alike. But this one had a well-bred air, and his face, despite that late jealous lowering

of the brows, was kindly and good-humoured, although somewhat weak about the mouth and narrowing in the forehead. He was sensitive, too, for his skin—of that kind which tans a scorching red with sun or wind—took a deeper reddish hue than its natural freshness as he felt Jack's eyes upon him, and guessed the latter's question to Mrs. O'Brien.

‘Who is our opposite neighbour, can you tell me? I seem to know his face.’

‘O, that one?—he is Mr. Cyril Vyvian,’ answered Kate, carelessly, rather too much so to a keen observer. ‘First cousin to our hostess and the heir to all she owns, I must warn you, in case Violet should be rash enough to attempt marrying anyone but a real live lord.’

‘The second time you have already warned me this evening, Mrs. O'Brien, and I am deeply obliged. But why should you bestow such valuable advice on a stranger—a mere bird of passage?’

‘Don't look so proud, Captain Ramsay,’ laughed Mrs. O'Brien, with a manner so soft and a look so seductively beseeching, no man

could withstand it. 'I am too impulsive and open in speech, I know ; but still I *never* have the bad taste to cast my pearls before swine. Only I am absurdly tender-hearted, and there are some men whom one would not willingly see wasting their thoughts where they are unhappily thrown away.'

'And you think, then, that mine are veering towards the head of the table? Mrs. O'Brien, what a bad compliment to yourself!' And Ramsay cheerfully looked straight forward at Violet Vyvian once more.

'It is the third or fourth time your eyes have wandered in that direction, at all events,' Kate mischievously whispered. 'Come—honestly, what do you think of my friend? Don't you admire her very much?'

'No—but I think one might like her very much. She looks a nice, sensible girl; and her expression is very taking. She seems to put all her mind into whatever she says to anyone.'

And, however he might disclaim it, Jack

looked with some sturdy admiration, partly because it was forbidden fruit, at Violet's face and figure. The girl showed, certainly, any amount of intelligence and sympathy in her features, her frank, well-opened eyes turning now with quick attention upon Lord Guisard, who was fatuously imagining himself particularly amusing; and her pink nostrils were dilating slightly, which might be either from keen interest or secret impatience. Violet looked especially well in evening-dress. Her shoulders were marvellously white, and had a perfect droop, while her little head was well set on her neck.

‘Lord Goosey!—Yes; she is giving him more attention than *I* should. Do you know that he is the only man in the county she could marry, because of his title? Only, I hope she will not really be so heartless and worldly.’

‘Is Miss Vivian worldly-minded? If so, she is only of a mind with most of the world,’ said Jack, lightly, yet conscious he was a little regretful at the thought.

(As Miss Vivian's position was unusual, so it would have been in keeping to find her different from so many girls in society. She looked so honest, unspoiled—yet how *could* a really frank, nice girl smile so pleasantly at that idiot just now? Rank and riches! Yes; plainly Violet worshipped them like the rest.)

‘No, no; I will never say my greatest friend is worldly,’ answered Kate, in a lowered voice, with eager defence. ‘It would only be natural, you will own, that she should thoroughly enjoy her present good fortune, and—not wish to forfeit it. Still, it would be an odious match, would not it? I am silly enough to care for a little romance myself: life, otherwise, would be all eating, and dressing, and paying the bills.’

The pretty speaker played, apparently unconsciously, with a gold bracelet on her arm, as she spoke, sending a dreamy glance from under her thick black eyelashes across the table into seeming space.

But Cyril Vyvian, bending forward a moment, seemed eagerly to intercept it. A sudden light

came into his eyes, making him quite handsome for the moment; then he leant back, nervously pulling his moustache with assumed indifference that ill-concealed a wave of satisfaction which spread over his face.

‘Hallo! what does that mean?’ thought Jack, inquisitively, who had a wonderful knack of seeing what went on around him. Aloud, he said, carelessly, glancing sideways, ‘I like those plain gold bangles. They always seem to me, among other bracelets, like a wedding-ring among jewelled ones.’

‘What! a keepsake, do you mean? Rufus gave me this,’ replied Kate, with a nervous laugh, making a quite unnecessary statement.

Then, changing her manner, she began to talk, with bright, highly-seasoned raillery, of all the guests around, fitting everyone with a fool’s cap to perfection in a way that would have gained her plenty of healthy hatred, could her neighbours have heard her. Only Violet and Mrs. Beaumont were spared.

Later on, when the men came into the draw-

ing-room again, Ramsay tried to gain a few minutes' talk with Miss Vyvian. She was charming in manner, as bright in her conversation as in her clear gray glances. But, just as he was beginning to enjoy his success, and to feel he should soon get to know her, the young hostess left him, after a few sentences, with a pretty apology given in her quick, decided way. She had to look after her other guests. Some of the younger and merrier souls had eagerly adjourned to the billiard-room across the hall, which was soon full of light laughter and cigarette-smoke. But a few quiet, or severe, old ladies were left, who, like Lady Guisard, called smoking, in that free-and-easy way, 'a sign of the times;' and Violet herself remained with them for most of the evening, discussing Primrose League meetings with apparent thorough interest, while a few, fat, old squires sat by from a heavy sense of decorum, longing, in their hearts, to be with the young folk and in the fun.

'She is worldly!' decided Jack, chagrined at thus receiving his *congé*, and he sought out

Margaret Beaumont for a quiet chat in a corner of the big drawing-room.

‘And what do you think of Mrs. O’Brien?’ his cousin presently inquired, after discussing family news.

‘Well, she is very handsome—— O! that is not what you meant, eh? What else do you want to know? She was sentimental up to a certain point’ (and, remembering the bracelet incident, Jack grinned); ‘then she grew caustic, and was most amusing.’

‘Yes; her tongue can be sharp enough. She reminds me at times of a drop of vinegar on a steel knife,’ was Margaret’s drily-gentle retort.

‘O, come! say a salad, rather; oil mixed with the vinegar, and a young green lettuce-heart,’ laughed Jack. ‘Where is she, I wonder—I must go and find her again.’

‘She may be in the conservatory. Shall we go and see?’

Rising quickly, as if she had some private end in view, Mrs. Beaumont led the way into a large conservatory opening from a little passage be-

yond the hall. Jack gave an admiring exclamation, for a small edition of the palm-house at Kew opened before his eyes. Great palms towered before them in a moist, hot, green jungle, through which a few coloured lamps shed a mysterious glimmer, whilst the heavy scent of gardenias and other hothouse plants pervaded the atmosphere, and made it seem like fairy-land. It was a winter-garden much higher and larger than those belonging to most country-houses equalling Forde Manor.

Margaret Beaumont went down the central flagged path, talking in her soft sweet voice as she went. Attracted by an orchid, however, Jack did not follow her, but turned aside. Suddenly he came round a monster tree-fern upon Cyril Vyvian and Mrs. O'Brien together, and could not help overhearing a fragment of their conversation.

‘And so you still wear it sometimes. If you knew how happy that makes me!’

‘Yes. I treasure it for your sake——’

Mrs. O'Brien broke off in haste, and started a little away, as Margaret Beaumont appeared

in the opposite direction to Jack, who was enabled by this diversion to approach without seeming an eavesdropper. In the most natural manner, Kate welcomed him sweetly, and, turning from Cyril Vyvian, went presently to the billiard-room with Ramsay at her side.

‘Ah! my wife has been showing you the conservatory,’ said O’Brien, in his cheery honest voice, as they came in together. ‘By-the-way, Ramsay, you are driving back alone to-night, are you not? Yes, I know. Old Mr. Bentley has got a touch of gout, and sent an apology by you, didn’t he? Well, I want to warn you to look out at the cross-roads on the top of the hill outside the park-wall. There is a ghost there, a black shape, they say, that constantly stops anyone driving by after dark, and gets up if there is an empty seat.’

‘I’ll give it every chance, and will capture it if I can. Shall I bring it to you in a bottle of spirits as a specimen, Miss Vyvian?’ laughed Jack, gaily, turning to Violet, who had allowed herself to exchange duty with the dowagers for enjoyment among her equals in age for a few minutes.

‘Faith,’ put in Rufus, ‘you remind me of a man near my own old home in Ireland who was a terrible fellow for drink. Not that *that* was the resemblance,’ he added, apologetically, amid a general burst of laughter, in which Jack heartily joined. ‘No, it was this. His family wanted to cure him, so one of them dressed up as a ghost and waited for him in a lonely lane one night. So he just walked up to the ghost, as bold as could be, only feeling a little curious on the subject. And says he, “Are ye one of the gineral resurrection, or are ye only taking a *wee daunder* (anglicé, saunter) by yourself?”’

‘Good-night, Captain Ramsay,’ said Violet’s sweet voice, as Jack took his final leave. ‘I hope you will not meet with any ghost; but I sometimes think there is some one playing foolish tricks, the superstition of our cross-roads is so widely believed.’

Half-an-hour later, Mrs. O’Brien and Violet were sitting together over the latter’s bed-room fire before separating for the night.

‘Heigho! How tired I was to-night of all

those stupid, worthy, old people,' exclaimed the girl, with an honest yawn, as she clasped her hands above her head, while all her fair hair fell down about her shoulders in rippling brown wavelets touched with gold here and there by the firelight.

'My poor dear, I knew you must be sick of them all in your heart, especially of Lord Goosey,' replied Kate, sympathetically, adding with a merry laugh, 'That pale moustache of his grows more objectionable than ever. It looks so like a white tooth-brush stuck on his upper lip.'

'How did you like your gunner? He seemed very pleasant from the little talk I could have with him,' went on Violet, dreamily.

'O, pretty well. His looks are his strong point, I fancy. He does well enough to flirt with,' was the evasive answer.

'You certainly always contrive to amuse yourself, Kate; while I am a slave to duty—duty—duty from morning to night.'

'If we could only change places, I would take your duties gladly for the sake of the compensa-

tion. I should be perfectly selfish and hard-hearted, and enjoy myself till I was a grey old woman. And that is what I advise you to do, my dear. Good-night.'

Whereupon, Mrs. O'Brien retired to her slumbers.

CHAPTER IV.

THE GHOST OF THE CROSS-ROADS.

ABOUT six o'clock on a winter night of bitter wind and soaking rain, Jack Ramsay was driving a dog-cart under difficulties by the park-wall of Forde Manor. It was a week after his dinner there, and he was on his way to spend a quiet evening at Littleforde with his cousin, Mrs. Beaumont ; his old host being obliged to attend a political meeting in the market-town from which Ramsay had excused himself. 'Soldiers have no politics,' he said. But still he had Conservative feelings, and the squire was a Liberal, though a mild one. So Jack was pleased enough to get the loan of a trap, and have a

comfortable chat with Margaret when he could arrange about sending his horses over to her house next week.

‘Ugh! what a beastly night,’ he nevertheless muttered to himself, after half-an-hour of it. ‘I almost wish I hadn’t come.’

The rain was pouring off Jack’s ‘deer-stalker’ in small waterspouts, as, with his hat crammed over his eyes and his coat-collar pulled up to his ears, he struggled on, feeling as cross as a bear, and as wet as a water-rat. The night was pitchy dark, except for the gleam of the lamps on the muddy road. Coming to a pretty stiff piece of hill, Jack allowed the horse to take matters more easily for a minute or two. There were cross-roads on the top of the rise, and just as he gained this last a voice suddenly cried out of the darkness,

‘Hi! stop; stop.’

Jack involuntarily drew up, with the thought that some one on that lonely road might be wanting help. A dark shape came close to the dog-cart and began getting up. Instantly the thought of Rufus O’Brien’s story, these very

cross-roads, the ghost, flashed upon Jack's memory.

‘Oh! that’s your game, is it? Not if I know it!’ he as suddenly exclaimed, realising that to struggle with an intruder who was once fairly beside him, and yet to control a rather spirited horse, would be no easy task. Laying a rough grasp, therefore, upon a slight but very real flesh-and-blood arm, he flung the figure off, sending it staggering backwards into the hedge.

‘Rufus!’ exclaimed the voice faintly. ‘Don’t you know me? Are you mad?—I asked you to look out for me.’

‘Who is it, in heaven’s name?’ asked Jack, a horrible surmise stealing over him that those woman’s accents, coming with gasps through the wind and rain, seemed somehow familiar.

He was out of the dog-cart in a trice, and had led the horse nearer. The light of the lamp showed a woman’s figure covered with a dark macintosh, the hood of which was pulled over her face. She was supporting herself with one arm against the high bank where she had

fallen, while the other hand carried a small basket.

‘Are you hurt?’ Ramsay eagerly asked, bending to look in her face; then starting, exclaimed in a shocked voice, ‘*Miss Vyvian!* How on earth do you come here on such a night, and alone, too?’ went on the young man; wondering doubts of what such a strange prank could signify crowding in his mind, as the girl remained, as he fancied, proudly silent. ‘Did I hurt you dreadfully? I am *so* sorry—but I took you for the ghost.’

‘Ah, the ghost! yes. You have a very strong grip, Captain Ramsay, but my arm is better now—it was rather painful at first,’ said Violet, in a faltering voice, and he guessed she felt more shaken than she would own. ‘Why I am here, is, simply that I went to see a poor sick woman in the village. Mr. O’Brien had driven to the railway-station, and I asked him to pick me up on his way back, as it is such a wet night.’

Poor Jack was overcome with repentance at the results of his mistake. He was so genuinely

sorrow-stricken over Violet's wrist, which he examined quite reverently under the lamp to make certain it was neither broken nor sprained, and begged with such abashed humility to be allowed to drive her home, now, as some reparation, that the girl frankly consented. She was quite sorry for him, in her fairness, so tried to make him forget what after all was a mistake for which he could not be blamed.

As Ramsay carefully helped her up beside himself, and then through the rain and darkness as he heard her clear sweet voice telling him of the sick woman she had just left—a pitiful little story—his preconceived ideas on the subject of the M.F.H. of the Marshwood Vale Hounds were completely upset. A girl who was such a thorough sportswoman, who was so bright in society and a capital hostess, he had never expected to find her doing the sister of charity on such a bitter night; a blessed messenger of relief to a dying woman with a terrible disease.

‘Will you tell me, Miss Vyvian, do you really like this sort of thing?’ he asked, surprised.

‘To tell you the honest truth, I hate it,’ returned Violet, with a low laugh, in a tone of confidence engendered by the feeling that they were two solitary beings out there together in the night and rain: interest in each other seemed quite natural under the circumstances. ‘If you only knew the horrid sores I am asked to look at; the burns and scalds!—and if I don’t, it would be thought a want of sympathy. They never guess, poor people, how sick it makes me feel.’

‘Then why on earth do it? There are plenty of women who really like amateur doctor’s work; why should you go against your natural feelings in this way?’

‘Because it is my duty, Captain Ramsay. Really, there is no one else to do it in this parish; and, after all, it is not more tiresome than half my other duties, which some people say they envy me,’ said Violet, with a little bright laugh.

‘What other duties, I wonder?’ queried Ramsay, fascinated by that cheery musical sound, and bending nearer in the vain endeavour to see something of his companion’s face

under her peaked hood, from which the rain was shooting in a small water-spout. 'You love the hounds, I am pretty certain ; and you play the hostess so capitally, you ought to like that too.'

'I can assure you that often I am sick to death of both,' said Violet Vyvian in a so utterly changed, low, serious voice that Jack was roused by the revelation of this girl's true inner self shown to him for a moment. 'Of course I love the dear old hounds, and they know me, too, everyone of them ! and I delight in a good run occasionally above all other excitement on earth. But still, for a woman to look forward to being obliged for years and years to lead this same hunting life ; to go out wet or fine ; and to have so much to decide upon always besides one's own province of household affairs (for good Rufus O'Brien is so conscientious, he is not happy unless I see into everything myself)—can you not understand that I feel the burden heavy sometimes, and wish my dear old father had allowed me to lead the same life as other girls ?'

'I can, indeed. You need some man to do it

for you, and to take the burden off your shoulders,' said Jack, rashly, with honest feeling.

No answer came for a moment from under the rain-sodden hood. Jack almost blushed to himself. Idiot that he was! How could he have alluded to marriage in that way, to a girl whose only present chance of a husband and helpmate in life was Lord Goosey?

Violet went on somewhat drily, as if overlooking his interruption,

'Then you are very kind to praise my manners as a hostess, Captain Ramsey. But now, honestly, *what* great pleasure do you think I could have taken the other night in the people it was my obligation to entertain?'

'None at all, I must confess,' laughed Jack, much relieved to find his slip of the tongue passed over; and more to discover Violet had not been worldly, after all, as he fancied when devoting herself to old Lady Guisard. O, hasty judgment of youth! He was ready to condemn or be loud in praise, according as frown or smile on a fair face fell to his share.

‘And I should have enjoyed myself much more, if you could have talked a little longer to *me*.’

‘So should I,’ laughed Violet in turn, infected by his frank honesty of voice that hardly seemed paying a compliment. ‘But such luck as doing just as one likes is seldom my lot, unless when I get a chance of laying aside my duties and being off to London. I tell Kate—Mrs. O’Brien—she has far more real fun in life than I have.’

It suddenly struck Jack Ramsay, with a sense of pity, how he had heard it said, when he first came down into this country, that Violet Vyvian had never had a lover. Never, in the sense of encouraging anyone who really cared for her, at least. She behaved so well, the old squire said, with approving nods; she was an example of propriety and perfect obedience to her dead father’s wishes, and not a horrid flirting creature like Mrs. O’Brien, who simply ‘imposed upon her,’ said the neighbouring matrons.

‘Poor girl—what a lonely life,’ thought Jack, with sincere commiseration, conjuring up a

mental picture of the uncongenial husband or lifelong solitude to which this young creature seemed condemned.

It was not, too, as if she was neither sweet nor lovable. By Jove! no; he had seldom met with a more engaging companion; there was a nameless sympathy, a stealing fascination about her manner when one was long in her company, that Jack found irresistible. He put out, without effort, all his own greatest powers of agreeableness, therefore; and, when they drove up to the door of Forde Manor, both felt as if days of meeting each other at dinners and covert-side would not have made them such friends as now they were by mute consent, drawn by the bonds of youth and of sympathy between two natures that suited each other.

‘By the way, there is to be some rough shooting here on Monday,’ said Violet, as she prepared to alight, suddenly gladly remembering Rufus had made arrangements to that effect. ‘Would you care to come over?’

Jack Ramsay very readily accepted the invitation.

A quarter-of-an-hour afterwards, he found himself entering Littleforde House, very considerably later than he would have been but for meeting Miss Vyvian on the high-road, only no longer in an ill-humour. On the contrary, quite a glow of satisfaction irradiated his face as he sat down in Margaret Beaumont's cosy drawing-room and related his adventure by a bright fire over a cup of tea. Margaret (though the most famous of housekeepers, and especially proud of her five-o'clock teas) absolutely forgot to hand the hot muffins, and waited with the dish-cover in her hand, as she listened to the tale.

‘It is so like Violet, to be off in any weather like that,’ she said, with gentle approval, though not meditating for an instant following the example.

‘You would not go and do likewise, though? But I forgot—you are far too delicate,’ said Jack, changing his chaffing tone; for Mrs. Beaumont suffered indeed severely from her heart.

‘Everyone has their gift,’ returned his

cousin, smiling. 'I am rather glad district-visiting is out of the question for me, for what between housekeeping, and my pet poultry, and looking after Dolly here, my time is quite full.'

She stooped to caress a chubby five-year-old fairy as she spoke, who, with praiseworthy zeal, was seated under the tea-table, her legs stretched straight before her, picking up the crumbs off the carpet, she declared.

'You see, my daughter inherits my love of tidiness,' said Margaret, with motherly pride. Unfortunately Jack, with a grin, discovered that the young lady was transferring any specially luscious morsel of either buttery muffin or a sticky currant to her own rosy lips instead of to the adjacent grate.

On the subject of Violet Vyvian, Mrs. Beaumont grew quite eloquent, though a conversational stillness and general looking after her guests' comfort was more her usual vein than prolonged talkativeness. Jack easily drew her out; he did not say much himself, but listened with a conscious pleasure to the praises

of his late companion. At last he observed, meditatively,

‘Queer, isn’t it? To think the only man she can marry—that is to say, hereabouts—is that fellow Guisard.’

‘Why should he be the *only* one?’ said Margaret, in a quiet voice.

‘Why—because, failing a husband with a title, I was told all the property goes to Cyril Vyvian.’

‘Exactly so! Cyril is a very good fellow, I think, worth far more than many a one with a coronet.’

‘What! you mean, then?—I see! you think she might marry her cousin. What a match-maker you are, upon my word, Margaret. Only, are you *quite* sure he is likely to be smitten in that quarter?’

Jack’s tone was ever so slightly sarcastic. Without cause he felt some chagrin at the idea.

‘I am certain Cyril would really be attached to Violet if he were only left alone,’ declared Margaret, with some heat. ‘They have been good friends ever since they were little

children, and he would make her an excellent husband. I mean to work my best for it, anyhow.' (So that was the meaning of Mrs. Beaumont's seemingly innocent move to the conservatory the other evening.) Jack briefly acquiesced; he supposed it 'would be a good thing for Miss Vyvian.'

Meanwhile, Violet herself had peeped with rosy-flushed face and rain-soaked garments into the boudoir where Kate O'Brien, in a becoming tea-gown, lay stretched on a sofa with a French novel fallen from her listless hand.

'So there you are at last! I would get up and kiss you for being so good, only I am too lazy,' was Mrs. O'Brien's welcome to her friend and hostess. 'I hope that good-for-nothing husband of mine picked you up in time, dear.'

'No! Rufus has missed me somehow. But some one else found me on the road, and drove me back;—whom do you think?' laughed Violet, with dancing eyes. 'Why, your handsome gunner!'

'Not Captain Ramsay?' Kate sat bolt upright.

‘Yes, indeed. I agree with you he is very pleasant,’ went on Violet, taking off her cloak busily, and somehow feeling inclined to blush just a little with Kate’s big black eyes fixed so steadily upon her. ‘More by token, as Rufus says, I’ve asked him to come and shoot here next Monday.’

‘My dear Violet, how could you do such a thing?’ expostulated the duenna, as Mrs. Kate called herself, in a grave, shocked voice. ‘No! I don’t mean about the shooting—though, as it is a small party, some people may wonder at your asking a perfect stranger—but to have it said that you were driving alone at night with this young man; Miss Vyvian of Forde! It will set everybody talking.’

‘Then let them talk! And, as to the shooting, I suppose I may exercise some little choice as to my own guests,’ declared Violet, half-vexed, yet resolved to be cheerfully defiant. ‘Come, Kate, you know perfectly I don’t flirt; and, if I did, you could not well throw stones.’

‘Precisely so, dear child. People know you don’t flirt, so they will be all the more sur-

prised when this vagrant artillery captain boasts of his evening's adventure (as he is sure to do,)' said Kate, slowly rising from her couch with a mildly persuasive, regretful air. 'Don't hate me for warning you, my dearest. What right, what reason have I to do so but as your best friend? Of course, I flirt myself; but as Rufus does not object no one else can say a word. Only, my poor Violet, you are not a married woman.'

'No; nor ever likely to be,' said Violet Vyvian, shortly, as she marched out with her head high. 'It is all nonsense! I won't mind!' she stoutly declared to herself in her own room. But she did mind. The bloom was gone from the memory of her pleasant night drive; and it had been so pleasant. She could not justly quarrel in her own mind with Kate, either, whose loyalty and affection she never doubted for an instant. Old Squire Vyvian had brought up his motherless little girl in a rather lonely way at Forde Manor. His own society; an easy-going governess; and taking her out with the hounds from the time she could sit her pony;

these were amusements enough for her, he had decided. It was only when Violet grew tall and pale, and showed signs of melancholy about sixteen, that the old family doctor declared she was moped for want of congenial companionship with young girls of her own age. So, for a year she was sent to a very select and expensive school, where the heretofore lonely girl warmly returned the violent friendship formed for her by her schoolfellow Kate. Then old Mr. Vyvian grew ill, and Violet went home. About eighteen months ago she had found herself mistress of Forde Manor, and was delighted to welcome Kate and her penniless husband as friends and her caretakers in the eyes of Mrs. Grundy.

CHAPTER V.

A ROUGH SHOOT.

TEN o'clock on a bright fine morning, and the hoar-frost still covered the ground with a white mantle in those spots where the rays of the January sun had not yet penetrated.

Jack, as he drove up to the front-door of Forde Manor, was greeted by Rufus and Cyril Vyvian, who were smoking their pipes under the portico, impatiently awaiting his arrival.

‘Come in,’ said Rufus, heartily, extending a great brown hand. ‘Come in, and have just a taste of the “crayther” to warm you up after your drive and keep your eye straight.’

‘Thanks,’ returned Jack, stamping about and clapping his half-numbed hands together, ‘I will, for I’m half-frozen.’

Entering the dining-room, he found it tenanted by Violet and Lord Guisard, the former leaning against the mantel-piece talking to the latter, who was gazing stolidly out of the window. His lordship had evidently been trying to make himself agreeable after his fashion, but, from the bored expression on Violet’s face, had not had much success.

‘That’s an awfully fetching dress of yours, Miss Vyvian, and just suits a good-looking girl like you,’ he had begun.

‘Thank you for the compliment on my dress, my lord, but pray, for the future, omit your remarks on the wearer,’ with a scornful little toss of her head.

‘Come, come, mayn’t a chap tell a girl she’s good-looking without her kicking over the traces? You’ll never do for double-harness, if you don’t bend to your bit better.’

‘Kicking over the traces! Double-harness! What do you mean? You know I hate pretty

speeches and compliments, which are never sincere.'

'You won't mind them from *me*, though, will you?' returned his lordship, with a leer that was intended to be intensely fascinating, but had really the effect of making him look somewhat like a sick vulture. 'If you only knew how awfully spoony I am on——' But here his remarks were cut short by Jack's entrance, which produced a decided scowl on the lordly brow; and, with a brusque nod and a curt 'mornin'' to the latter, he stalked off to the window.

'How do you do, Miss Vyvian? I am almost ashamed to meet you, after my brutal conduct to you the other night. I do hope you are none the worse?' said Jack, with perhaps just a shade of tenderness in his voice.

'O! no, thank you,' replied that young lady, somewhat coldly; but she felt the colour mounting to her cheeks, for somehow, try as she might, she could not but feel attracted towards this man. 'But what will you have?' she added, remembering her position

as hostess, and turning away towards the side-table.

‘I would rather have a cup of hot coffee than anything else, if you will give it me,’ responded our hero, who, though he answered lightly, was secretly vexed at the altered tone of Violet’s demeanour.

‘Slops’ll do you no good,’ grunted his lordship from the window. ‘Better have a B-and-S.’

This exhilarating beverage Jack declined, and during the discussion of his coffee vainly endeavoured to draw Violet into conversation. All his attempts, however, proved futile, and so he and Lord Guisard proceeded to join the party outside, where Rufus was engaged giving some last instructions to the keeper and beaters. On their passage through the hall, they encountered Kate O’Brien, who greeted Jack effusively, and who, as she shot a glance at him from her dark eyes, allowed her hand to remain in his perhaps a trifle longer than was necessary.

‘We are to join you for lunch, you know,

Captain Ramsay; and then I shall back *your* gun at the hot corner,' she observed, archly.

'I am afraid, Mrs. O'Brien, you will lose, if you are so imprudent,' returned Jack, a shade of annoyance passing over his handsome countenance; for he did not like this sort of bare-faced apparent admiration. 'You will generally find it safer to back the bird; and, remember, I have given you fair warning,' he added, laughingly.

It had been proposed by the keeper that they should devote the morning to 'driving' partridges and trying the hedge-rows, as well as beating an out-lying spinny or two, whilst a covert of some forty acres—that had only been shot once during the season, and which was a favourite haunt of woodcock—was reserved for the afternoon's sport.

All being ready, the party made a move, and, after a mile's walk, arrived at their ground, some rough grass and rush-grown fields, where the first drive was to commence. Here the four guns were placed in line, some hundred yards apart, behind a big, straggling bank, sur-

mounted by a thick growth of hazel, high enough to make the birds rise well as they topped it. To Jack and Lord Guisard were assigned the places of honour in the centre, whilst Rufus and Cyril guarded the flanks.

In the meantime the beaters had made a considerable *détour* in order to drive some adjoining fields in which the expected coveys would probably be found. After about a quarter-of-an-hour's waiting a large flock of starlings, accompanied by a few field fares, dashed over with a cry of alarm, and soon they are followed by the cry of 'M-a-a-r-k o-over, ma-ark,' faintly borne on the wintry breeze. A solitary bird comes whizzing over the tall hazels straight for Rufus, who stops him neatly in mid-career. Then 'swish,' like lightning, comes a strong covey between Jack and his lordship, who salute them with four barrels, the result being three down, whilst another as he reaches the end of the field towers suddenly up, and then slowly descends in that gyrating flight which so well denotes a dead bird. Following these, three single birds come over; one is killed by Jack, while his lordship

misses the others, and consequently uses a good deal of bad language.

This drive over, another was begun, and here the position of the guns was slightly altered, as they were placed just below the brow of a hill over which the driven birds skimmed low. Here they had some very pretty shooting, as covey after covey came swinging along at the top of their speed, aided by a favourable breeze at their backs. A confiding hare or two was also added to the bag.

The next two drives, however, were not quite so successful, the birds breaking back and declining to face the guns. Great was Lord Guisard's wrath.

‘What an infernal old fool that keeper is!’ he said, turning to Jack.

‘I don’t see that it is the keeper’s fault,’ was the quiet reply.

‘Can’t you? Well, I can. If *I* were master here, I’d pretty soon send that old idiot about his business.’

‘Cad,’ muttered Jack to himself; but to his lordship he merely replied coldly, ‘Well, my

lord, as you are *not* master here, don't you think it is somewhat questionable taste, finding fault with your hostess's servants ?'

'Ugh!' was the rejoinder, grunted forth by the boorish peer, 'it is all very well for you who have all the shooting, but *I* don't come all this way to see things mismanaged;' and he stalked off.

It was now suggested that the party should divide and try some hedgerows which converged towards a small copse some half-a-mile distant. Rufus and Jack formed one party, whilst Lord Guisard and Cyril Vyvian composed the other. Each division was accompanied by a few beaters and a brace of well-broken, liver-coloured spaniels. Very pretty sport they have, too, as the little dogs bustle along the broad tops of the double banks, now putting up a rabbit, which pops out only to try and pop back again before his career is cut short by a charge of No. 6 shot. Then a hare sneaks forth, and, laying back her long ears, stretches away at her best pace. Jack is too quick for her, however, for ere she has covered forty yards she is rolled

over stone-dead. A few cock-pheasants afford easy shots, and were added to the bag. On reaching the spinny Jack and Rufus found the other guns had not added greatly to the bag, his lordship loudly cursing his gun, his cartridges, the beaters and dogs, all of which, he maintained, had contributed to his bad shooting. Cyril held his tongue, but winked and glanced significantly at Rufus, who good-humouredly remarked,

‘Ah! never mind. You’ll do better after lunch, perhaps.’

To this meal they presently adjourned after beating the spinny, out of which a woodcock flapped in an owl-like manner, right into Lord Guisard’s face, and was fairly missed by that nobleman.

On arriving at the underkeeper’s cottage the sportsmen met Violet and Kate, who were busy unpacking the contents of the luncheon-basket. In this they were assisted by the gentlemen, with the exception of Lord Guisard, who, remarking that ‘it was deuced cold,’ proceeded to

place his back to the fire, and monopolize what little warmth it gave out.

Violet's conversation was mostly addressed to Cyril, and she studiously avoided speaking to Jack more than was necessarily dictated by courtesy.

'Who was it missed the woodcock? I hear one was seen,' asked Kate.

'There is the culprit,' rejoined Jack, pointing to Lord Guisard, 'and I am afraid he can hardly excuse himself for——'

Now Jack, as a rule, was the most courteous of men, and under ordinary circumstances would never have been guilty of a remark like the above, which certainly flavoured of rudeness, but he was disgusted with his lordship's boorish manner, and had conceived a decided antipathy to him.

'You would have done the same,' savagely interrupted Guisard, 'if your fool of a fellow had sent you out with the wrong gun. Come, I'm ready to back myself against you for the remainder of the day.'

‘I never bet hardly, and should hardly care to back myself against such a *professor*,’ was the somewhat sarcastic reply.

‘O! afraid of losing your money, I suppose,’ sneered the now angry peer.

‘Well, perhaps I am; but I tell you what I don’t mind doing. Let us four men have a sweepstakes. Each put in a sovereign, and he who kills the first woodcock wins the lot.’

‘Done,’ chimed in Rufus. ‘We’ll ask Miss Vyvian to be stakeholder,’ he added, and forthwith four golden sovereigns were deposited on the table-cloth and handed over to Violet’s keeping.

‘A charming idea,’ smiled Kate; ‘and if *you* win, Captain Ramsay, as a *preux chevalier* you will make over your winnings to me, won’t you?—for I’m going to risk my little pile on you. Come, my lord,’ she added, turning to Lord Guisard, ‘I’ll back Captain Ramsay’s shooting against yours—shall we say for a dozen pairs of gloves? I will walk with you and keep your score, whilst Violet shall keep Captain Ramsay’s. Is it a bet?’

‘O! very well; but I hate having a woman talking and bothering me out shooting; they are always in the way,’ was the ungracious rejoinder.

‘All the better for me, if that is the effect the society of us poor women has upon you;’ and, rising up, Kate made him an ironical little curtsey; then, turning to Jack—‘Now, Captain Ramsay, do your best, and, as my champion, wear my colours.’ So saying, she detached a bunch of violets from her bosom and pinned them into Jack’s button-hole.

As she did so a look of pain passed over Cyril’s face, and he bit his lip hard. Rufus—good cheery Rufus—was accustomed to these little flirtations of his wife’s, and took no notice beyond good-humouredly remarking, ‘Well, Kate, if you lose, don’t expect *me* to pay your debts; now let us be moving.’

Just then, however, a pony-carriage pulled up in the narrow lane down which the beaters were already trooping, and Margaret Beaumont alighted.

‘How do you do, dear?’ and she greeted

Violet with an affectionate kiss. 'I was driving this way, and thought I would like just to look on at the shooting for a little while—that is, if I am not in the way.'

'Not at all,' broke in Cyril. 'You are just in time to see a most sporting wager decided between Mrs. O'Brien and Lord Guisard; and now you are here, Mrs. Beaumont, we will enlist your services. Come,' turning to Kate, 'will you have the same bet on with me, Mrs. O'Brien? I am quite willing to back myself against Captain Ramsay. Mrs. Beaumont can keep his score and Violet shall keep mine.'

A shade of annoyance flitted across Jack's countenance; but he merely answered, coolly,

'I am sure Miss Vyvian will find more work with her score-list with you than if she accompanied me, so let it be so.'

And thus it was agreed. On the way to the covert Cyril and Violet maintained an apparently animated conversation, which the former in his heart of hearts hoped was as gall and wormwood to Kate.

The covert was a very snug one, lying on the

gentle slope of a hill facing the south, with a little meandering stream trickling along its bottom. The top side was composed of tall oaks and birch-trees, with a dense undergrowth of hazel and brambles, which struggled out from amid great boulders and weather-worn rocks covered with dead bracken, thick enough for game to hide under, and at the same time afford them plenty of room to move about, whilst the soft, boggy ground, and thick alder clumps bordering the stream, spoke well for its being a favourite haunt for woodcock.

It was divided into square patches by well-cut grass rides, which greatly facilitated the beating as well as the shooting.

The top side was to be beaten first, and on all sides the constant tapping of the small boys who had been sent on as 'stops,' to keep the birds from running out, resounded clear on the frosty air. These urchins were delighted at the part they had to play in the proceedings, and no doubt at the close of the day would tell each other wonderful tales of their deeds of prowess in turning back a sneaking old cock-pheasant

or some particularly wily hare ! At length the line of beaters was arranged, and only awaited the signal to begin.

Rufus and Jack were to take one ride, one to be forward, the other in a line with the beaters alternately, whilst the same arrangement was to be carried out on the other side of the strip to be beaten by Lord Guisard and Cyril.

And now the beat begins. The old keeper has got his forces in good order and well disciplined. No shouting, or 'hi-cock-hi-cock !' does he allow. His orders to the beaters are imperative, viz., merely to keep line, and tap the trees and bushes as they advance, and any beater infringing these commands knows he will not be employed again. Each gun is allowed to shoot four hen birds, and no more. Rufus, when the guns are properly posted, gives a whistle and then the fun begins.

Several hen-pheasants rose first and came speeding over Jack, who dropped one, whilst Rufus did likewise with another. Then sundry cocks were seen running on; one popped right out into the ride, and, catching sight of Jack,

got up in a terrible commotion ; but he was too late, for, as he got clear up over the top of a tall oak, his flight was suddenly arrested by Ramsay, and with a thud he crashed through the branches, leaving only a few feathers floating in the air to mark his downward course. In the meantime the other guns were likewise busy, and the reports came quick and sharp in rapid succession. And so the game went on, little piles of tell-tale cartridge-cases accumulating in the rides till all the topside was beaten. Then the lower part was taken, and here Jack and Lord Guisard were sent forward, and their shooting was fairly good.

After a successful right and left Jack was reloading when Margaret Beaumont said, excitedly,

‘Look, Jack, there is a woodcock coming straight over Lord Goosey’s head.’

Yes, there came the ‘long bill,’ flapping lazily along, but apparently unseen by the lordly sportsman.

‘Woodcock to you,’ sung out Jack, and as he did so Lord Goosey caught sight of the coveted

prize. Throwing himself back, he pitched up his gun and fired; but the bird was past him, and at the report twisted rapidly in his flight, and, uninjured, skimmed back towards the side of the covert some fifty odd yards from Jack.

‘Always fire at a woodcock, no matter how far,’ was Jack’s creed, and he let the wily cock have both barrels. A lucky pellet finds a billet in the soft-fleshed body of poor *Scolopax*, and down it comes fluttering to the ground.

‘Well done, Captain Ramsay,’ called out Kate. This, and the fact of having missed the bird himself, in no wise improved Lord Guisard’s temper, and his shooting became worse and worse, two more woodcock escaping on his side.

At length it was all over; the game was gathered, and laid out on the greensward in one of the rides, and a very respectable show it made: fifty-three cock-pheasants, twelve hen-pheasants, twenty-three hares, sixty-eight rabbits, one woodcock, and a jay—that marauder having been foolish enough to risk his life by crossing Rufus’ path. Not a bad total for a

‘rough shoot,’ considering the addition to the bag made in the morning of some fifty odd head!

Much interest was now displayed as to who had won—Jack, Lord Guisard, or Cyril, and the three fair score-keepers were soon busy adding up their totals. At length the result was announced: Lord Guisard, twenty-four; Cyril, fifty-four; Jack, fifty-three.

‘Never mind, Captain Ramsay, you did your best; and in consideration of having won the sweepstakes and one bet for me, I’ll forgive you for losing the other;’ and Kate looked bewitchingly at him with her full dark eyes.

‘I am very sorry, Mrs. O’Brien, you should have had such a *fainéant* knight, but I hope the more solid advantages of the sweepstakes will make some small amends for my other short-comings,’ returned Jack, coldly; for he was disgusted with the open way Kate expressed her admiration for him, and was determined to show it.

On the way home he vainly endeavoured to draw Violet into conversation, but that young lady wrapped herself in a mantle of reserve, and,

as soon as he attempted to allude to their adventure at the cross-roads, changed the conversation. This, as is natural in human nature, made Jack all the keener to elicit an explanation ; but all his efforts proved abortive, and on leaving Forde Manor that evening he had to confess himself beaten.

CHAPTER VI.

A QUICK FORTY MINUTES.

ABOUT a fortnight had elapsed since the shooting-party, and as yet Jack had not had an opportunity of asking Violet the reason for her altered demeanour towards himself, which, put it how he would, he could not explain.

Was it that unlucky remark of his during the drive? No, that could not be the cause, for they had parted perfectly good friends. How then had he offended? He had in the interim met Violet one day at Margaret Beaumont's, whither he had now transferred himself and his horses; but other visitors being present he had been unable to talk to her on the subject he had at

heart. Neither had the hunting-field afforded an occasion for demanding explanations, since Violet, who was suffering from a cold, had been obliged to appoint Rufus as deputy to her position.

‘All things come to him who knows how to wait,’ it is said, and the truth of this adage was verified in our hero’s case ; for one fine mild day in mid-February he at last met her. It was on this wise :

The Marshwood Vale Hounds had met at a place called Compton Cross Roads, and Jack, who arrived somewhat late, was only just in time to see them find and go away with a burning scent. There were but few people out, but Ramsay, as he topped his first fence on Harlequin, saw Violet’s scarlet jacket gleaming as usual in the van. A mile or so of grass, some eight to ten fences of various sorts, and a lucky turn in his favour at last put him on terms with the pack. Hounds had, however, slightly flashed over the line, and required old Tom’s assistance. Seeing they could make nothing of the line that worthy caught hold of them, and by a bold forward cast

once more hit the line of his fox, and the pack took up the scent with a drive and dash that evidently meant business.

On, on they speed—now Tom leading, now Pile on a raw four-year old who was being taught the way he should go, and anon Violet to whom at the check Jack had only time to lift his hat and utter a hasty ‘good-morning.’

The fox was evidently heading towards the far stretching downs that loomed out grey in the distance, but with such a scent he must be a good one to reach their sanctuary. The country, though, was in his favour—instead of the good sound pastures, flying fences, and cut and laid doubles they had up to now traversed, they had got on to cold bad scenting-land; heavy clay ploughs that cropped up occasionally, intersected by bottomless ‘goyles,’ and great straggling, hairy, blind fences, all tended to give the pursued a decided advantage over the pursuers.

Hitherto they had been running up-wind for some ten minutes with but the one trifling check before alluded to. Suddenly hounds threw up in a narrow lane close to a cottage

out of which an angry cur bounded with an indignant bark.

‘Cuss them cur dogs,’ muttered old Tom, who took in the situation at a glance, ‘that brute has turned ’im, I’ll lay a guinea. Folks have no business to keep such beasts,’ he added, with resentment, as he turned his horse’s head, and held the pack down the lane, giving a sly cut at the cur dog as he passed. ‘A-ats e’e, Parody, old lady, there’s the line,’ he ejaculated, as an old badger-pied bitch feathered under the bank, and then threw her tongue as she scrambled up.

The eager pack flew to her cry and took up the line across the grass field beyond, and somewhat in the direction they had come from. All the field, most of whom knew the country, clattered down the lane, but Jack, whose one thought was to be with hounds, turned in at a gate that a small boy was holding open. Only Pile, Violet, and Kate O’Brien followed him across a couple of fields. Then they were confronted by an apparently impassable ravine, or ‘goyle.’

‘By Jingo! we’re done, captain,’ exclaimed the hard-riding farmer. ‘What a fool I was not to remember this place,’ he muttered, as, turning his horse round, he galloped back in the direction of the lane, followed by Kate O’Brien.

Violet’s first inclination was to do likewise, but at that moment Jack’s quick eye caught sight of a rail-mended gap in the thick fence that bordered the ravine.

‘Do wait a minute, Miss Vyvian, we may be able to get over here,’ said he, in a low voice, and there was so much entreaty in his tone that Violet acceded.

On arriving at the spot it proved to be just practicable to a clever, steady hunter, provided the rail was removed. Jack soon dismounted, and, applying all his strength, smashed the offending piece of timber. Still, even with this dislodged, it was an awkward, decidedly awkward spot. A horse would have to slide down through a lot of dead fern and brambles on to a sort of small ledge, and from thence it was a sheer drop of some seven feet over a little stream.

‘I think I could manage to get over, Miss Vyvian, as old Harlequin will creep anywhere, but I hardly like asking you to ride over it; will you get off and let me lead your horse over?’ queried Jack, after an examination of the spot.

At this proposal, which almost threw a doubt on her horsemanship, Violet’s pride rebelled, and, flushing up to the roots of her hair, she replied, coldly,

‘I am not in the habit of getting off, Captain Ramsay, and don’t mind going first: will you please move on one side.’

The covert sarcasm of offering a ‘lead’ to him, Jack, as good a rider as ever crossed a horse, and one well-known between the flags on many a steeplechase course, stung him to the quick.

‘Certainly not; if either of us go at the place, you must concede the honour of leading to me,’ retorted he, somewhat hotly; and, jumping on Harlequin’s back, he walked him up to the gap.

The sensible animal poked its nose out, and,

feeling the ground first to make sure, slid and slithered down through the tangled growth of briar and fern, with hind legs well tucked under him, poised himself for a moment on the little ledge, and then dropped lightly down over the boulder-strewn bed of the rivulet on to the narrow shingly beach beyond. It was now Violet's turn; but her horse, though a brilliant hunter, was not quite so accustomed to cramped places as Harlequin, and evinced a disposition to decline. However, under Violet's light hand, he eventually was coaxed up to the brink, and, with much snorting and trembling of the forelegs, slithered down on to the ledge. Arrived here he seemed undecided, and, for a moment, it seemed as if horse and rider *must* fall into the depths below.

Jack, looking on, felt almost sick at what he justly considered the imminent peril of the woman whom, in his secret heart, he was beginning to think more of than he cared to own. He got hot and cold by turns, but durst not speak.

But Violet had not ridden and hunted from a

child for nothing ; with all her wits about her, combined with courage and a cool head, she seized the moment when her recalcitrant mount had his head straight and was shivering over the brink to give him a sharp cut with her hunting-whip. This little reminder had the desired effect, for, springing out with a great soaring bound, he landed on the far side—on his nose truly, but with a peck and a scramble he was up again in a trice, and—it was no fall !

‘Thank God,’ muttered Jack. ‘Now, come along ; we’ll soon catch hounds up again,’ he added, louder.

The opposite bank, though high, sloped more gradually, and had to a certain extent been worn away by cattle coming down to drink ; and so they experienced no great difficulty in surmounting it.

As they reached the summit, and set their horses going, Violet, who had noticed the expression on Jack’s face, and felt that she had been unduly severe, observed,

‘Thank you for the lead, Captain Ramsay. What a good little beast that is of yours.’

Now nothing pleases a sportsman—a *real* sportsman, mind!—more than praise bestowed on the good horse he rides; and these few words of commendation bestowed on his favourite, and by Violet, were a decided solace to Jack's wounded feelings. With a blush of gratified pride that made him appear still handsomer than even his usual good-looking self, he patted Harlequin's arched neck, as, standing in his stirrups, he merely responded,

‘Thank you for Harlequin, Miss Vyvian. Such a remark, coming from *your* lips, is worth a great deal to us both.’

But it was no time for talking, or paying compliments. Hounds were still running hard a field a-head, and, save themselves, not a soul was in sight. Fence after fence they took together, but still no nearer could they get to those dappled forms flitting along in front of them. Some five-and-twenty minutes had elapsed since the passage of the ‘goyle,’ and the pace began to tell. Harlequin, good, honest, little animal that he was, commenced to sob a bit; his stride was laboured and shorter, but with all the gameness of the

Arab blood that coursed through his veins he still cocked his ears on approaching each fence, and never made a mistake. Violet's horse, even with her light weight, was beginning to show signs of distress, and to hang heavy on his mistress's hand. His rider too was exhausted, and her white face and quivering lip showed that she was feeling the effects of such prolonged exertion as much as her steed.

And now hounds, instead of keeping the straight-forward course they had hitherto maintained, swung round to the left, then turned to the right; in fact, it was evident the fox was beginning to run short. Fortunately, a handy line of gates enabled Jack and Violet to reach the pack without calling on their now distressed horses for much further exertion in the shape of jumping. Entering a field by one of these, Jack viewed the beaten fox crawling along the fence at the far end; the pack—who had also caught a view—were, with hackles up, straining every muscle to encompass the death of their hereditary foe.

‘Tally-ho! yonder he goes,’ screamed Jack,

his handsome face beaming with excitement and maddened with that delirium of the chase which can only be appreciated by one who has ridden through a really good run : then, clapping spurs to Harlequin, he bustled down the field at the best pace that poor animal could command. Violet, his distressed horse, everything, was flung to the winds. He had only one thought. There was the fox not two hundred yards ahead, and *only one* fence between them ! Had he been riding a camel, a donkey, or any other animal innocent of the power and knowledge to negotiate a stiff fence, it was not in Jack's nature not to try to get close to hounds under such temptation. Moreover, he had Violet's eyes upon him. Had even the Thames, or any other navigable river, been in front of him, he would have felt bound to brave the obstacle and get over it—*somehow* !

Formidable the fence was certainly, particularly on a beaten horse, and of a nature that would have made nine men out of ten think twice before they rode at it—in fact, it was an instance where discretion would have been the better part of valour. But Jack's blood was

up, and, with that wild delirium pervading him of which poor Whyte Melville so aptly sings :

‘ Oh ! it’s worth the risk to life and limb and neck, boys,
To see them drive and stoop,
Till they finish with whoo-whoop !
Forty minutes o’er the grass without a check, boys !’

he only saw a little dragged, spent form struggling onward with bent back, and sixteen-and-a-half couple of hounds towling and tumbling along after it frantic for blood.

The fence in question was a stiff flight of new oaken post and rails, some four feet odd high, morticed together, that gave no indication of breaking or bending, with a wide, clean-cut ditch on the take-off side. The ground fell slightly towards the fence, and, though this to a certain extent favoured his horse, it was a nasty fence at the best of times, a still nastier one on a horse that could barely raise a canter. As the hounds struggled through—some slipping between the bars, whilst others topped the highest rail—Jack, with compressed lips and a set, determined look on his face, neared the

frowning timber. Violet, with better judgment, pulled up, and cried out warningly,

‘For Heaven’s sake, Captain Ramsay, don’t ride at that!’

But her appeal falls on deaf ears, as, with sobbing strides, game little Harlequin responds to his rider’s call. With a mighty effort he does his best, rises well, and clears the ditch, but, alas! the rails are beyond even his daring spirit or power, and he lands right on to the stout timber. There is a crash, a confused, struggling scarlet and bay mass, a flashing of four bright shoes in the air, and with a groan he rolls over into the next field, with Jack beneath him.

Suppressing a cry, and faint with exhaustion, excitement, and terror, Violet felt her head swim, and clutched the pommel of her saddle; but the next moment, to her intense relief, she saw Jack extricate himself from his fallen steed, and bareheaded run towards the spot, only some hundred yards on, where hounds had just run into their fox, while his shrill ‘Whoo-whoop!’ rang out in accents that betokened that he at

all events was not much the worse for his crushing fall.

He soon cleared a circle with his whip, and, putting his foot on the body of the fox, whipped off the brush as old Tom, who seemed to have dropped from the clouds in some unaccountable manner, accompanied by the first whip, trotted in through a gate at the far end of the field.

Leaving the obsequies to be performed by the Hunt-servants, Jack turned back with the brush in his hands, and to his great relief saw Harlequin rise and shake himself, and begin cropping the short sweet herbage. Climbing over the fence, he went up to where Violet sat on her horse as white as a sheet, and with tears of exhaustion trickling down her cheek. Strive as she might, she could not control her emotion, nor combat the rival feelings engendered by Ramsay's safe escape and her own weakness.

‘There, Miss Vyvian, though your hounds have hunted and killed as good a fox as I ever

saw, will you let me have the privilege and honour of handing you the brush?' said Jack, going up to her side. 'But what is the matter?' he added, in tones of alarm, noticing her blanched cheek. 'Are you ill or faint? Let me help you off your horse.'

Bending forward as if endeavouring to conceal her tears, Violet swayed for a moment in her saddle, and Jack was only just in time to save her from falling. Lifting her down very tenderly, he rushed to the ditch, soaked his handkerchief in water, and, returning, bathed her brow and temples. This, and a few drops of brandy that he induced her to swallow from his flask, revived her. Violet was soon herself again, and sat up, attempting a weak smile.

'Thank you—I hope you are not hurt; and is—is—Harlequin all right?' she stammered.

'O, yes! we are both as right as possible; a little shaken, perhaps; but, you know, we soldiers are accustomed to hard knocks.'

How handsome he looked standing there bareheaded, with the faint breeze stirring the

wavy curls of his brown hair, with his grey eyes looking so keen and brave; and then the tender solicitude of his voice, the courage and determination he had shown all through the run, and his ready thought for *her*, all tended to make Violet feel drawn towards this man as she had never been attracted by anyone before.

‘I think, I will get on my horse now—will you put me up?’ she asked, with all her charm of winning manner, and a glance that went straight to Jack’s heart.

Put her up, indeed! Why, he would ride over that big fence again the next moment for one more such look, thought Jack, as he dexterously hoisted her into the saddle, and walked by her side to a gate, going through which, after a slight *détour*, they regained the large pasture where the hounds were breaking up their well-earned fox, and a few, a very few of the field who had struggled to the end were standing in a group, comparing notes of the glorious run. Only some dozen horsemen were there, but Pile, whose four-year old was cast in a ditch,

and Kate O'Brien were not amongst them, though Rufus was one of the lucky number. Many were the congratulations both Jack and Violet received.

'Ah, captain, you did us all, and you ought never to part with that little hoss,' observed old Tom, touching his cap, and pointing to Harlequin, who was standing by with dilated nostrils and heaving flanks.

'No, Tom; that I never will,' replied Jack, remounting, at the same time slipping a sovereign into the old huntsman's hand with a playful apology for 'having had to do *his* work!'

Hounds and horses have had enough for one day, and, with the prospect of a long jog home, it was decided not to draw again. So, by degrees, the few remaining followers dropped off at the various cross-roads and lanes that led to their respective homes. Rufus, riding by the huntsman's side, was busily engaged discussing the run, and by degrees Violet and Jack found themselves some distance in the rear.

'Miss Vyvian, you will not be angry with me,

or think me a conceited idiot, will you? if I ask you a question?’ began Jack, after a somewhat prolonged conversation on the different points of the run.

‘That depends on what it is.’

‘Well, I must take my chance of your being offended with me, as perhaps you would have a right to be with such a comparative stranger as myself,’ explained Jack; at which Violet began to feel just a trifle nervous, not knowing what was coming next; ‘but I *do* want to know how I have offended you?’

‘Offended—me! Good gracious, Captain Ramsay, why should *I* be offended with you?’

‘Ah! that’s just what I want to know; but somehow, ever since that unlucky adventure at the cross-roads, your manner has been so different to what it was formerly that I cannot help feeling that, with the usual stupidity of my sex, I must have blundered somehow, and either done or said something to annoy you. You know you hardly spoke to me at all out shoot-

ing the other day. Now, do tell me my fault ; and then I will apologise most humbly, and endeavour not to offend again.'

Violet's conscience pricked her, for she remembered her conversation with Kate, and now, O ! what would that friend say when she heard of her having nearly fainted, etc., etc., in Captain Ramsay's company. She, of course, could not tell Jack that their names were being coupled together ;—what was she to say ? She was fairly driven into a corner. At last, forcing a little laugh, she answered,

'Come, Captain Ramsay, you should not let your imagination run away with you so. Cannot you make allowances for a poor girl, with ever so much worry on her shoulders, being silent sometimes and disinclined to talk ? Even as hostess, you know, one cannot be always chattering.'

'No, I agree with you there ; but I must say I never heard you *chatter*,' observed Jack, with a merry twinkle, looking full into Violet's eyes.

At this she turned away to avoid meeting his

gaze, as if to arrange her habit, and replied, in a tone of apparent carelessness,

‘Don’t you know what somebody says—Helps, I think—about friendship? How, if two people when alone together talk incessantly, their friendship is only in the bud, whereas if they only speak when they have really something to say, you may be sure they are *real* friends.’

‘That is true, but they must get through the budding-stage first, before reaching the reality! I don’t think though, Miss Vyvian, you have quite answered my question yet, unless with you the bud of friendship has expanded, and you are doing me the honour, which I scarcely merit, of counting me amongst your *real* friends?’

‘But you *would* be my friend, would you not?’ This with a slight tremor in her voice.

‘I hoped you knew that; but there are people who think that friendship, pure and simple, cannot exist between man and woman.’

‘Mrs. Grundy, you mean, I suppose? She is a lady on whose opinion *I* set very little value.’

‘Neither do I, as far as I myself am concerned; but I should be sorry to think that anyone I lov—liked,’ added Jack, correcting himself, ‘suffered from her unsparing tongue.’

‘But what is false cannot hurt one eventually. Remember what used to be written over the castle gates of old by the Keiths, Earls Marischal:

‘“They haf sayd,
What sayd they?
Let them say.”’

‘With your *theory* I agree entirely, but, like a good many other theories, it doesn’t answer in practice.’

‘Then you would refuse to do a woman a friendly turn, for fear public opinion might attribute false motives to you? I really had a better opinion of you,’ exclaimed Violet, with quick warmth, almost contempt of tone, carried away by impulsive feeling.

‘You misunderstand me; indeed, I had hoped that *our* friendship had become too well-established for *you* to think so meanly of me. One

of my best and truest friends is a woman, as you know.'

'Mrs. Beaumont? Yes, she is one of the few people one trusts instinctively from the beginning.'

'You have only known her, I suppose, since she came as a widow to live at Littleforde?' interrogated Jack.

'Yes, not a long time, you may say; but events, more than time, prove what sort of stuff people are made of.'

'Well; will you, Miss Vyvian, always be a friend to me such as *she* has been—at least, until I forfeit the right to such friendship?'

'Yes, willingly; and there's my hand on't,' responded Violet, laughingly, with a frank smile, tendering him her hand, which lingered in his perhaps a trifle longer than was necessary; and, as he pressed it warmly, she added, 'Now we've had our chat, and I am getting cold, so I think I shall trot home. Adieu, Captain Ramsay. Good friends always, mind.'

A turn in the road soon hid the girl's slight figure from view, and then Jack, lighting a

cigar, and getting off, walked the rest of the way home by Harlequin's side, cogitating on the events of the day. He could not help asking himself the question, 'Am I getting too fond of this girl?' and wondering what would be the end of it all.

CHAPTER VII.

THE OLD, OLD STORY.

A FROST! The very night after Jack Ramsay and Violet so happily rode homewards together after their last run from Compton Cross Roads, which might have led to such serious consequences.

The wind, fickle as a woman, had shifted to the north. Two days later the hunting world awoke to find the roads ringing like iron, with crackles of ice round thinly-frozen puddles by the wayside.

Rufus kept standing at a window, staring moodily across the park, and stroking everlastingly his great red beard. Then—needing

man's companionship—what more natural than that the good fellow should seek out another of his kind, and betake himself through the woods to a door made expressly by Miss Vyvian last summer in the park-wall, and that led into the lane just opposite Littleforde House. (Rufus and his wife had gone away that summer to Ireland, so Violet had turned much more to her elder friend for companionship, and learned to trust in and to look up to Margaret Beaumont with a clinging affection quite as great, in a different way, as her attachment to Mrs. O'Brien. The latter shared all Violet's merry moods, they hunted and laughed together, and planned their amusements. But if in any trouble, or only feeling depressed, Violet always silently put on her hat and went to Littleforde. After that remedy, even though she might not have thought it necessary to tell Margaret of her special trouble, she generally came home feeling comforted.)

‘Going to look up Captain Ramsay, Rufus?’ Violet inquired, carelessly, meeting him half-way on his quest, apparently by accident.

‘Well, I want to see Margaret about something, too ; so I may as well go with you.’

She would not have had the courage to go by herself. It was absurd ; but she could not understand her own secret shyness.

Rufus and Jack Ramsay always smoked together in Mrs. Beaumont’s stables, and daily inspected the latter’s small stud with mechanical diligence ; later on they somehow always lounged into Margaret’s pretty morning-room, ‘Just to pass the time of day,’ as Mr. O’Brien cheerily said. Then naturally he talked to Mrs. Beaumont, whom he much admired as ‘a pretty woman, and so pleasant and nice to talk to ; she understands everything one tells her about hunting, though she never rode herself, more’s the pity!’ Like Madame Recamier, Margaret was a good listener. Meantime, Jack and Violet Vyvian improved their friendship, unheeded, with wonderful rapidity.

After three such mornings, Mrs. O’Brien suddenly found her eyes opened, as she mentally expressed it.

‘You two mean creatures ! You might have

told me you were both at Littleforde enjoying yourselves, no doubt, while I thought you were busy at the farm, or over horrid, stupid accounts,' exclaimed the handsome brunette, with an aggrieved pout, drawing closer her somewhat thick eyebrows, which naturally almost met. 'And I have only been reading novels over the fire all the time.'

'Come along then to-morrow, with all the pleasure in life,' cried Rufus, heartily. 'We never thought you wanted to come, did we, Violet? but, upon my soul, I believe it's that handsome gunner she's after.'

'O, yes; do come,' repeated Violet, carelessly. 'I have to consult Margaret Beaumont about my new prize cochin hens that are drooping again. I thought that sort of thing would have bored you.'

Mrs. O'Brien accordingly accompanied them next day; but, true to her word, Violet only talked poultry to Mrs. Beaumont all the time. Jack certainly lounged in with Rufus; but, seeing he had no chance this day, he responded but dully to the play of Kate's raillery, and pre-

sently excused himself on the plea of having letters to write.

‘Is that all you have been doing these last mornings down at the little house, Rufus? Now tell me the whole truth, sir,’ asked Kate, with a pretty disappointed pout, when later on she found herself alone with her lord and master.

‘Of course it was. What else would we do?’ he replied, in his hearty big voice, his blue eyes as wide-open as those of a child. ‘Did you think, now, I’ve been flirting with the widow? Upon my life, I think I’ll take to it now that you’ve given me the notion.’

(Honest Rufus fully believed he was telling the simple truth.)

‘Rufus!’ observed his wife, dispassionately, as she gazed at him: ‘You are a goose; but I believe you this time. You never deceived me wilfully at any rate.’

Did some thought strike herself, as the words left her lips? for Kate turned quickly, escaping an attempted caress, of a playfully big-doggish kind, from her husband, and a warmer red came into her cheeks.

Then, in a few days, the ice began to bear on the great pond in the park; neighbours drove up to Forde Manor from far and near with skates, and prepared to stay till the red sun should have dropped low behind the giant Scotch firs in the park. Violet was once more busy as mistress of the hospitalities, for lunch was spread for every one at the boat-house, and later on a bright fire at a sheltered spot showed where five-o'clock tea was ready to refresh all the guests. But still she could enjoy herself pretty thoroughly while skating; for Margaret Beaumont took the care of the elders off the girl's young shoulders, and Jack Ramsay was always, oddly enough, close at her side when wanted to fasten on her skates, and glide with her for a long breathless stretch down the winding pond, and in and out among its dotted islets covered with rhododendrons.

Skating is even better than dancing for making two young people acquainted. There is more trust and abandonment to the guiding skill of one's companion; more freedom in the wide expanse of ice over which the skate-strokes are

ringing, and in the fresh crisp air around ; more opportunities to be alone together for the venturesome ones who strike out boldly from the shores ; with many a pause, unseen, behind wooded corners and eyots where, while taking breath, much may be said with eyes as well as voice.

Jack Ramsay was not slow to avail himself of all these advantages when with Violet Vyvian.

‘Why not?’ he almost angrily communed with himself over his cigar once or twice o’ nights, when a chill whisper of wisdom disturbed his easy mind. ‘I know nothing more can come of it ; she knows the same ! But why can’t we be friends?’ So, while the ice on which these two young people were skating grew thicker for two or three days more, it grew thinner and thinner in another sense.

Mrs. O’Brien came to the rescue, unknown to both.

‘They will go souse in over head and ears, unless I can keep them out of danger,’ she said to herself, gazing darkly with knitted brows, on

the very first day, over at the two most graceful figures on the pond. Then turning to Cyril Vyvian, who was always her faithful squire, she would hint, with a sweet unfathomable glance out of her black eyes, that perhaps he had been too long by her side; people's tongues were so idle. Would it not be better if Cyril were to take his cousin Violet for a turn, just to avoid talk?

A few minutes later, Kate, who, though so fine a horsewoman, was too tall and not firmly knit enough for skating very well, would pause, and looking—O! so softly—up in Jack's handsome face, let drop just the least word of laughing warning.

‘Take care of your wings—remember the moth.’

‘Don't you know the saying about the rose? If one cannot have it, one may as well be with her who is nearest it,’ said Jack, with mendacious audacity, gazing straight in Mrs. O'Brien's beautiful, almost swarthy face, lit up by her brilliant eyes and glowing tints of cheek and lip.

She shook her head in laughing disbelief of his implied compliment that she herself was the first object of his admiration. As, however, the same little theme, with variations, was played between them every day (and that more than once a day), it began to have a curious contrary effect on both. Jack, warned not to fall in love, man-like, felt all the more ready to close his eyes and rush into the forbidden danger; the more he became conscious of an ever-growing longing to be with Violet all the time, he saw through Kate O'Brien's little ruses, and resented them.

‘She is an arrant flirt,’ he said to himself, when, after catching sight, now that he was on the alert, of an occasional meaning glance of private understanding thrown to Cecil, he found himself the recipient of still more tender and stolen ones a few minutes later. ‘She is incapable of any true feeling; but two can play at her game.’

And Ramsay accordingly did thus play, succeeding so well, although not given to flirting by nature, that he puzzled Kate. Sometimes

she believed him ; at others she suspected him of laughing in his heart as he looked straight in her eyes, and, without moving a muscle of his somewhat adamantine though handsome young face, paid her some extravagant compliment, as if it was a toll she exacted from all passers-by.

‘Can he be deceiving me?’ thought Kate to herself, striving to watch his manner towards Violet, which was more diffident and distant.

Sometimes she fancied (and truly) that his features softened, and his voice took a more tender sound, when addressing the heiress of Forde Manor. Then the demon of jealousy woke strong in the woman’s heart. Violet and she had never clashed before in their likings, for the poor girl had hitherto been so hedged-in by her father’s will that she had never had the temptation to indulge her own preferences. Never before had any ‘ineligible’ been thrown daily in Miss Vyvian’s company as was Jack Ramsay.

‘I will not be made a fool of by this man. He *shall* like me best—I swear it! To be out-done by Violet! And he never can be anything

to her either !' thought Mrs. O'Brien passionately when alone, clenching her hands, while her dark brows met in a stormy line. Then her face softened ; a little smile crept about her full crimson lips as she recalled some attention of Jack's towards herself, and, secure of victory, she murmured—' And he is *so* handsome ! Yes, I must succeed.'

'I trust you are not falling into the fair Egyptian's toils, Jack,' Margaret Beaumont said, with a little motherly tone, half quizzical, one of those days. She always declared Kate had something of the features, though not the sleepy expression, of a worshipper of Osiris.

Jack gave her one of the honest glances she had known so well in his boyish days ; they were rarer now.

'To speak in the vulgar tongue, my dear Margaret, no fear! I like Mrs. O'Brien about as much as you do, not more. But she is the close companion and friend of Miss Vyvian, whom I do like sincerely, so one must be civil.'

'Quite so. And I am really glad you are diverting Mrs. Kate's flirtations from poor, good

Cyril. He is much more attentive to Violet these days ; don't you think so ?

Jack wished in his heart his cousin Margaret would not make himself her confidant about her grand matrimonial scheme, but he dared not say so. Warnings on one side, confidences on the other, all to prevent him being 'too great friends' with Violet. He grew grumpy, inclined to be irritable all round. At times he betrayed this, and found Violet's sweet eyes fixed on him wonderingly. Then, when next he was alone with the girl, he would hold her hands all the tighter as they skimmed over the ice, while his face and voice showed her in a hundred little ways that he never could be vexed so long as *she* was thus beside him ; and, feeling then perfectly happy, he made her happy too. And so they two, secretly, were passing step by step together into a fool's paradise.

One night came a thaw. The ice still held its own, but some spots seemed weak ; and good Rufus, who could not have skated a stroke without making a spread-eagle of his prostrate body, stood on the banks and watched

anxiously over the public safety. There was one place off which he specially warned them all, where was a little dam and sluice. The ice had been kept broken here for some time to let the water run, and its coating was accordingly thin. In a wayward mood, Kate came skating towards this spot; she was alone, and perhaps, without going too far, wished her admirers to notice she was nearing peril.

‘Kate, go back! don’t come this way, it is dangerous,’ roared Rufus, from the bank, getting excited.

Kate looked up saucily; she rather liked teasing her big husband. Cyril Vyvian was beside him on the bank, too, and Captain Ramsay. She herself had lingered before joining them all for tea, and now was the time for a sensation.

‘What danger? Why should I not come?’ she sweetly asked, taking two short strokes nearer and pausing (the ice did not crack yet!) O’Brien was always easily roused. He lost all his self-control at once, and his really terrified anxiety for his wife’s safety took the form of anger.

‘Go back this instant; do you hear? Do as I order you, madam, or, by heaven! I’ll not answer for the consequences,’ he shouted, his face growing as brilliant red as his flaming beard, while the veins swelled on his forehead. Another fair man beside him reddened, too, with inward fury. Cyril Vyvian glared an instant at O’Brien, on hearing the rough words, as if he could have gladly struck the giant down; then looked eagerly, imploringly at Kate.

Kate calmly watched her husband and those on the bank while one might have counted ten, then turned; slowly and gracefully she skated away. Cr-a-ack! went the ice behind her, near where she had stood.

‘Thank God!’ muttered Rufus, almost inaudibly; then he mopped his forehead, on which some cold drops of fear had broken out. Jack watched him with a smile of friendly pity, thinking how easily gulled some men may be. Another man deserved Ramsay’s pity still more, but he did not know it.

Next evening Kate O’Brien stood alone in her own room, re-reading a letter in her hand.

It was one that agitated her a good deal; for, though the door was locked, she looked up nervously at every sound as of a passing foot-step, and a sombre fire burned in her big eyes and glowed dully in her cheeks. One sentence of the letter ran thus :

‘It made my blood boil yesterday to hear the coarse indignity with which you were treated—you, of all women. You are mated with a clown, but if I may only live for you, as I would gladly die for you——’

Kate stopped here in her re-perusal, for the third or fourth time, of her strange letter.

‘Mated with a clown! Perhaps I am,’ she said to herself, ‘but, still, the clown has good qualities, my friend Cyril. Should I be any happier, with a tormentingly-jealous, kindly but weak, nagging sort of man like yourself? I doubt it.’

Then, in her mind’s eye, she saw poor Cyril’s home: neglected-looking grounds; an old house, that could no longer bear its weight of centuries, crumbling to decay.

‘If Rufus is penniless, or pretty nearly so, you are not much better off,’ she soliloquised, addressing an imaginary interlocutor with a curl of her lip. ‘I am no prude. I am, perhaps, not a very good woman; but if ever I do run away with another man and break my husband’s heart, it would have to be for more than you can offer me.’ Then, flinging the letter impatiently down, and stamping her foot: ‘What a fool the man is! If I had ever thought he would have swallowed the bait so greedily, I should have almost let him alone. But no! he was certainly beginning to fancy Violet when we first came here, and making up his mind in his shy, simple way to propose. Margaret Beaumont would have urged it as a natural and proper marriage. Violet would most likely have said yes, after a year or two of freedom, for she always liked him in a sisterly way. And then where should I and poor Rufus have been?—obliged to pack up and be off. No more hunters for me, no more dresses; only a dog-kennel of a house somewhere, and two maids.’

Kate O’Brien stood and sighed. It was

hateful to be poor, she mused. But for that carking care she would never have jumped at Rufus O'Brien, when she caught the simple fellow by her first attempts at witchery after leaving school.

‘Well,’ she finally concluded, ‘in any case I shall not be so mad as to answer Cyril by letter as he begs. Who knows what might happen to it? Two lines, saying I will let him know to-morrow—that will not compromise me.’ Kate looked at the fireplace, and, taking up Cyril Vyvian’s letter once more, seemed inclined to burn it. Then she changed her mind swiftly, and, crossing the room, carefully put it in the secret drawer of a little cabinet, the key of which never left her. ‘It may prove useful some day, who knows?’ was her last reflection, with a dark, prophetic smile.

The following afternoon, as the sunlight began to slant low and red, Violet Vyvian left the other skaters and said to Mrs. Beaumont, with a touch of affectionate concern,

‘I am uneasy about poor Kate. She had a bad headache and could not join us to-day.

Would you mind just looking in on her presently, to see that she does not feel too lonely?’

‘Of course. I will go now,’ Margaret readily answered.

She did not much like Kate in her heart of hearts, but still received her with kindly welcome into the outer court of her regard; and she was always pitiful in cases of illness.

(‘It must be something serious to make *her* stay away from all the fun on the ice,’ reflected Mrs. Beaumont.)

Being an intimate of the house, Margaret troubled none of the servants, but went straight to the boudoir that was allotted to Kate as her own retreat. Softly opening the door, with consideration for the sufferer’s headache, Mrs. Beaumont found herself still partially hidden by a tall screen from the observation of two persons, who seemed so deeply excited by their conversation that neither noticed her, their backs being turned towards her. Margaret stood riveted by what she saw and heard. She had no great presence of mind; and only felt that next moment they *must* see her, and she

would be under the disagreeable necessity of explaining her presence.

Cyril Vyvian was sitting, with his head supported on his hands, seeming bowed down with the weight of some strong feeling.

‘Kate! my dearest—you can’t mean it. You can’t refuse me after all that has passed. All yesterday and to-day I have waited in absolute torture for your answer. I could not eat or sleep,’ said the young man in a broken voice, quivering through and through with misery.

As no answer came from the woman’s figure half-lying on the sofa, he went on, in a tone of wildly bitter reproach :

‘Have you befooled me, then? For weeks, yes, months past have you not given me to understand you were miserable with your husband? that you only cared for me? And now—now! that I implore you to come to me; to leave off living this lie——’

‘I tell you that you have gone too far, Mr. Vyvian,’ said Kate, in a stifled voice, but scornfully; what of her face was visible among the sofa-cushions, in which it was half-buried, being

dark-red with an anger perhaps the greater that she felt it was hardly justified.

‘*Mr. Vyrian !*’ murmured the man, in a whisper of humiliation and agony of mind so painful the listener was seized with pity. Then, with a spark more of spirit : ‘If I have said too much, whose doing is it ? Kate ! remember how you never rested till you had drawn the very heart and soul out of me ; how you have maddened me by assurances you loved me in return just as passionately. But you can’t mean it ! . . . You will let me make you a home, and you will be its light and queen. We will leave England for a while——’

‘No ! no ! no. My poor Cyril, you have deceived yourself. Of course I care for you, but not to that extent. Be reasonable—perhaps, indeed, it would be better that you should go away for a little while yourself. But you must never speak to me on this subject again.’

A sudden, sharp in-drawing of breath, a sound like a startled groan came in answer to Kate’s words of cool, kindly admonition, that were given in the sort of tone one uses in expostu-

lating with a spoilt child. Almost at the same moment, had the speakers been less absorbed, they might have heard the door gently close.

‘So that is over; and a good thing, too,’ thought Mrs. Beaumont, as she went sedately down the passage; and her brown eyes were alight with this secret intelligence of her neighbour’s affairs, but her still sweetly pretty mouth somewhat pursed. Though herself a good woman, who quietly succeeded in abstaining even from all appearance of evil, Margaret was not easily surprised. She knew human nature, and judged nobody. Perhaps she felt a thrill of almost pleasurable excitement; of pitying, of course, yet half-amused elation at proving what she knew now. ‘It’s very wrong, but I can’t help it,’ she told her conscience. Frail human nature again!

Presently, watching from the drawing-room window, she saw Cyril cross the terrace with white and haggard features.

‘Ah, well! in time he will be cured, and come back to Violet. But she would never care for

him, if she knew this,' thought Margaret. 'So, for both Cyril's sake and hers, I will not breathe a syllable about it.'

And she kept her word.

CHAPTER VIII.

DRIFTING.

THE week of merry skating at Forde Manor was abruptly ended. A thaw came in the night, and cheered the hopes of the Marshwood Vale men, only to turn, tantalisingly, into a slight fall of snow; then back went the thermometer to freezing-point. The ice was spoilt, and hunting was as impossible as ever. What was to be done in such aggravating weather?

Violet Vyvian settled the point with herself by going out for a brisk walk through her own woods, accompanied only by Crab, her pet terrier. The sun was shining cheerily through the bare branches, on which the snow of yesterday had

left a lightly frozen coating; the sky was blue as on a summer's day. There was a crisp freshness in the air that brought a rosy glow into her cheeks which was eminently becoming. Or, was it the cold outside? Were not the warm thoughts in her heart as answerable for that sweet flush, while a new dreamy light was in her eyes, as she wandered on alone, and felt glad to be away from all observation of even friendly eyes, free to commune with her own heart.

All the events of the past weeks seemed to flit before Violet's mind. Once more she rode that last run—with *him*. Once more she felt the horribly sickening fears for Jack's life, as the scene at the last fence rose before her mind like a picture; she remembered her faintness; and then the blissful consciousness of coming back to life with his arm round her, his face looking into hers. Jack Ramsay had unhappily become so much the *one* man on earth for poor Violet that she never thought of him, now, by name; a bad sign for her peace of mind. Then she tried to turn to other thoughts, dimly aware of danger; but the happy hours on the ice,

words, looks, a hundred little memories in which he and she were the two only, or principal actors, came next before her. By day and night, at all hours and places, Violet was fast becoming engrossed by one thought; struggle as she might (and she did so!) it was ever there and supreme, however in the background. And that thought was of Jack Ramsay. What was he doing? When might she see him again? Already, Violet secretly marked time's flight by each occasion on which they two met. She dared not go this morning to Margaret Beaumont's house; a sudden shyness seized her nowadays even before that best friend. But there was a hill in the grounds, rising above the park-wall and the lane behind it, from which she could look down on Littleforde, and this was a pleasure she would not deny the urgings of her heart.

‘Why not? He will soon be going away, no doubt. And it only hurts myself,’ argued the girl, aware of her own weakness in thus stealing to look from a little distance at the house which sheltered the man she loved. (At the same

time he might be in the stable, Violet remembered, with a laugh against herself; or perhaps, as she had found him once before, leaning over the pig-stye wall, smoking a cigar.)

Violet strained her eyes downwards in vain. No living speck of humanity could she descry below in Littleforde, except two figures forking manure. Turning away she betook herself to a keeper's cottage near, endeavouring to impress on her own mind that this was the real object of her morning stroll.

‘Well, Haggett, and how is your rheumatism?’ she asked, as the keeper, a valued dependent of old Squire Vyvian, appeared at the door of his tidy lodge and begged her to walk in.

‘Main bad, miss; main bad,’ said the otherwise hale and hearty-looking man, with a ruefully comic smile. ‘But it sarves me right, it do. You see, I went out t’other marnin’ and forgot to put my tattie in my pocket, as Cap-tin Ramsay advised me. “’Taint wuth turnin’ back for,” thinks I, when slap! by midday I

was took so terrible bad wi' the pains I could hardly hobble home.'

'I don't understand,' said Violet, bewildered. 'What has Captain Ramsay, or a potato, to do with it?'

The keeper, with a half-ashamed look, explained that Jack, having one day seen him in pain, had come several times afterwards to visit him, and had suggested a simple remedy used in his own country against rheumatism, that of always carrying a potato in one's pocket till it grew black inside with absorption of 'the bad humour that makes the rheumatics,' said the worthy man.

'And 'tis wonderful what a cure it made in me the second day. He be a kind gen'man, he be, for sartin. He has zat there, in thick very chair you be zattin' in, miss, talking 'bout the dogs, and the pheasants, and so on for an hour to a time. He be so kindly like, he reminds me more of your good father, more nor any gen'man I have ever seen since at Forde Manor, if you'll 'scuse my sayin' so, miss. He be so pleasant, and ain't got no high and mighty notions as

some young men has now-a-days ; he be such a rare good sportsman, too, and Mr. Harkhollei do tell me he be a rare good man on a 'oss.'

And so the old man rambled on, enthusiastic in Jack's praise, whilst Violet sat by, delighted, in the very chair her hero had occupied. She little guessed that Jack, when he sat there, had just as keenly listened to the description of all her own virtues, after skilfully enticing good Haggett to a subject on which he was always garrulous, namely, the rare good qualities of his young mistress.

A quick knock came at the cottage door presently ; and, as the keeper went to see his visitor, Jack's tall figure appeared on the threshold, welcomed by Crab, who recognized a friend, with extravagant delight. Seeing Violet within, he stopped, embarrassed, and his colour heightened. Curiously, despite all his natural advantages, Jack was very modest, even shy, with the women he most admired and cared to please. So now, though his quick, glad smile showed a pleasant gleam of white under his moustache, his eyes sought Violet's

face with quite as humble and deprecating a look as that with which the terrier was begging him to kindly greet itself. Violet had given a guilty start; her own cheeks took on a lovely if fleeting carnation tinge.

‘I—I hope I am not disturbing you, Miss Vyvian,’ stammered Jack. ‘I only looked in to know how Haggett was, and to bring him some tobacco. I am just going.’

‘I was just going, too; please don’t mind me,’ returned Violet, rising confused.

Somehow they both found themselves outside the keeper’s cottage in another minute or so, and were walking together slowly back to the hill-brow overlooking Littleforde. Neither knew how it happened. In the glade behind them, Haggett stood at his cottage door, and forgetting to gloat over the excellent bird’s-eye, for which he had just uttered his most respectful thanks, looked after them perplexed.

‘‘Tis a thousand pities about the squire’s will,’ was the slow conclusion he arrived at; then slowly shook his head and went indoors to smoke a bit.

Meanwhile, Jack and Violet paused on the hill where two paths diverged. Both were growing strangely shy of each other. Then Jack said, hesitatingly,

‘I must not intrude on your morning ramble, I suppose, Miss Vyvian. I thought that perhaps I should meet O’Brien somewhere about.’

‘He is busy,—that is, Kate is out of sorts to-day; she has caught a chill, I fancy, and good Rufus is quite distressed, and is staying in all the morning to try to amuse her by clipping her poodle,’ Violet replied, trying to collect herself.

‘He is one of the best-hearted fellows I know; and a capital husband, I should think,’ was Jack’s warm encomium. ‘But I thought I heard Mrs. O’Brien asking Vyvian, your cousin, to play the barber under pain of her sovereign displeasure.’

‘Cyril has suddenly deserted us all; he sent me a letter this morning saying he was sick of the frost, and was off to Paris. It is a queer freak of his, for he always used to hate going away from here. Is Margaret very busy this

morning? I was thinking of looking in for a few minutes.'

'Very busy,' grinned Jack. 'There was a scare this morning that Dolly was lost. She was discovered later comfortably ensconced in a wardrobe containing her mother's best gowns, as a nice soft retreat, in company with a pot of apricot jam. It seems to have proved too much for her, for she is rather upset, like the various persons she succeeded in alarming. Margaret says penitence has something to say to it, but I fancy Dolly's conscience must be in her digestive organs. Finding I was not wanted by anybody, I came out, feeling solitary.'

'Precisely my case,' laughed Violet. 'In her heart she had felt impatient that morning at seeing Kate exacting slavish obedience from her good-natured husband. And it was his special day for business, too. Yet poor Rufus was quite happy at this rare desire of his wife's for his companionship; and one could not quarrel with her for that. They neither of them needed Violet: she was an outsider. Margaret Beaumont had her little child, too, to be all in all to

her; Violet was the third person there again. The girl felt a longing to be first with somebody. It was so lonely to be always only second best. Her face changed, and it fell unconsciously as she went on: 'Nobody wants me either.'

'You are wrong there; I do,' said Jack, softly; adding, with an earnest look, 'Surely friends may need each other's society; and we are friends, you and I?' Then, as Violet mutely assented by a grave little sign of her head, the young man went on eagerly: 'You will let me go with you for a little way?'

So they two disappeared into the depths of the wintry wood. And their minds went further yet, and deeper into a sweet summer fool's paradise. It embowered their spirits; a wood of fancies and thoughts through which they two only wandered. There they were lost together, alone as in an Eden; and low spoken words, mutual glances, soul to soul, and now and then the touch of a hand were as the flowers of that blissful imaginary domain.

As they stood on the hill-top, both had been so absorbed in their meeting, neither noticed a pony-carriage in the lane below. Yet Mrs. Blatherwick was seated therein, waving her handkerchief vigorously in greeting, while her husband flourished his whip.

After an hour or more of a delightful walk—one that both would long afterwards look back to as having brought them nearer than ever into sympathy and mutual understanding—they came to a clearing in the woods. There was a slope before them, on which the snow was frozen harder than elsewhere.

‘You might slip here. Better take my hand till we get down,’ said Jack, with a tone of friendly authority, as caretaker; though there was little danger.

‘O, I should run down it, if I were by myself,’ said Violet, carelessly; yet she gave him her hand, and was conscious of a little flutter as she did so.

‘Shall we run down together, then?’

Jack grasped his fair companion’s hand tighter as he spoke and set off. Like a couple of children

they raced down the slope, inspired by a spirit of fun, while the terrier rushed ahead and round them, in frantic delight, getting in the way in a most inconvenient manner. At the foot of the slope they paused to laugh and look at each other.

Jack thought that he had never before seen Violet looking so lovely. In truth, she was *not* lovely; her features being too irregular, even faulty, to deserve any such high praise. But then it was her especial charm that, after being some time in her society (and how often he had been so!), one grew to believe her quite beautiful, simply from her fascination of manner. And besides her brown hair waved upwards so prettily under her hat; the little curls that showed above her boa seeming golden-tipped. Her eyes shone with such brightness, sending their beams straight, it seemed, into Jack's very heart; and the flush of exercise on her cheeks was so bewitching that he felt quite foolish, and——

‘Shall we walk on?’ murmured Violet, drawing away her hand. Only then Jack became

conscious he had been standing still and holding it, as he gazed at the girl.

With slow, almost lingering steps, they went on side by side, till an opening in the trees showed Forde Manor-house, standing square and solid, with its brick walls and stone facings, showing a ruddy, weather-toned, red and white visage, between its neighbouring sombre cedars.

‘What a dear old place it is!’ escaped almost unawares from Ramsay’s lips. ‘I can well imagine that you would not easily give up its possession for everything else you might be offered.’

‘Not easily,’ answered the girl, low. ‘And perhaps not for any *thing*. But I think that one’s happiness depends more upon people than places after all.’

She spoke slowly, almost hesitatingly, yet the slight emphasis on the word any *thing* was unmistakable, and made Jack start with a sudden tremor. Could it be ?—Did she mean, that, for the sake of any *one*, she would renounce all this fair heritage, and content herself with the little

income left her by the late squire in such an event? Jack could hardly believe his ears; his brain seemed to be partly stunned at the new overpowering idea.

They had come, meanwhile, to a lovely bit of park scenery. A high steep slope, covered with snow, rose to the edge of a hanging wood, that was fringed with a winter glory of mahonia turned to every shade betwixt yellow and russet, and shining-leaved hollies, bearing proudly aloft their bunches of crimson berries. The trees above formed a haze of brown, delicate twig-tracery, while some dead leaves, still hanging to the branches in this sheltered spot, gave a warm dull-red tone to the wood, contrasting beautifully with the pure white mantle of snow that lay on the expanse of park beneath, dotted here and there with clumps of rhododendrons, the massive tops of which were likewise thickly frosted over.

The drive wound at a little distance through the park, emerging from another and lower wood under the hill.

‘What beautiful winter foliage! I must try to get some of those leaves to put in my great china bowl in the hall,’ exclaimed Violet.

‘Wait here, and let me go up for you. What is the use of having a slave, and not making him do your bidding? Besides, you might slip.’

‘Why should I? That is so like a man, to imagine a woman cannot even keep her footing without the help of your superior sex,’ laughed Violet, rather coquettishly, and she bravely proceeded to scale the bank. But it was steeper than she reckoned, and at a specially slippery spot half-way up she was soon obliged to avail herself, first of Jack’s proffered stick, and then of his hand.

Jack gave a little exulting laugh, and looked down at her with a glance of protecting fondness that sent a warmer flush leaping into Violet’s cheeks. It was so sweet to be taken care of like that; and she knew, by Jack’s look, it was as sweet to him to take care of her. Hand-in-hand, they mounted to the top, and steadied themselves on the very steepest place under the hollies.

‘I must gather them myself,’ Violet declared, with feminine wilfulness.

‘Then you must take hold of my arm. I insist upon it. This is really as bad as Alpine climbing. I ought to have brought out an ice-axe and cut steps for you up here, if I had guessed you would be so foolhardy,’ Jack replied gravely, looking very determined.

Violet meekly obeyed. It was a new feeling, and she rather marvelled at it.

A few sprigs of holly were broken off carefully, then Violet essayed a branch much higher than the others.

‘Do you think I could get this one?’ she questioned, with one arm stretched as high as she could possibly reach, and her fingers pausing on the twig while she looked at Jack, awaiting his answer.

She was so pretty with her sweet grey eyes turned so confidingly up towards his face ; she was so dangerously near. Jack’s pulses beat fast. He pressed her arm closer to his side with a stifled utterance. He answered her look with another shining one that seemed to dart down to

the very depths of her clear soul, with such a sudden happy light, as it were, that Violet started a little in maiden shyness. Cr-ack! . . . She broke off the high branch with a great effort, in sudden haste to break at the same time the awkwardness of the situation.

But, unhappily—even as the branch snapped—poor Violet lost her balance. She made a desperate effort to steady herself by clutching at Jack's friendly support, from which she had involuntarily loosed her grasp. His feet, alas! slipped also at that instant, just as he tried to get a better hold in the frozen snow, that was like a boy's slide in its treacherous slipperiness. Next instant, both found themselves ignominiously descending the bank much quicker than they had come up, and catching wildly, but in vain, at any projecting portions of earth or brambles to stay their progress. At the foot of the slope both picked themselves up rather breathless, and looked with immense discomfiture at each other, then burst into a fit of laughter; while Crab barked vociferously, as much as to say he quite understood the joke.

Jack's coat had caught on a tough, broken root, midway, which had held him fast a second, but then set him free after inflicting a rent right up to his shoulders.

Violet had escaped with lesser but similar marks of defeat, and she had slightly bruised her foot.

As they stood thus, still shaking with mirth at their sorry plight, both became aware of the sound of wheels in the drive ; and soon Mrs. Blatherwick's voice was heard, calling out,

‘Miss Vy-vian ! Captain Ramsay ! Goodness gracious, are you hurt ? How did you happen to fall down there ? We saw you both when you were rolling half-way down. My !—what a fright I got.’

‘Thank goodness ! then she did not see us *before !*’ thought Violet, as she limped forward, and blessed in her heart the intervening trees which had screened them from the visitor's gaze.

‘But you must let me drive you back, and Billy will walk. You are a little lame—my

dear Miss Vyvian, you must allow me to recommend you a cold bandage at once, and not to stand about on that foot——’

‘Come,’ interrupted Billy, her spouse, with a good-humoured growl; ‘you are keeping Miss Vyvian yourself with all this chatter;’ and he insisted on Violet taking his place.

‘*Such* an hour for me to call!’ went on Mrs. Blatherwick, with rather obsequious apology. ‘But indeed—though it seems quite providential in a way—we did not mean to go in; that is so familiar, I always think, in the morning. But I brought over a little offering—only some *real* guava jelly that Billy had sent to him by a West-Indian friend. I hoped you would not mind the liberty—it is so hard to get it good in England.’

Then, delighted that Violet pleasantly expressed her thanks, Mrs. Blatherwick felt emboldened to continue, with a little confidential laugh,

‘We saw you both ever so long ago, my dear, standing on the hill above Littleforde. Quite a romantic little picture you made, as I said to

Billy. But I hope Mrs. O'Brien, your chaperon, won't scold you ?

‘Why should she ? She is with me as my friend, not my keeper. I do not hold that I am responsible for my actions to anyone but *myself*,’ returned Violet, sweetly, but with a gentle haughtiness not lost upon the visitor.

‘There ! I’ve nearly put my foot into it,’ thought the latter. ‘How Billy would scold me if he knew ; just when I have such a lovely chance of making friends with the girl, too ! Catch me chaff her again about Captain Ramsay ! It’s a case, I’m sure—and she can’t take him, of course.’

Mrs. Blatherwick was very anxious to be on more intimate terms with Violet, who was, as the lady expressed it, a ‘cut above her,’ and belonging to the best set of the old county families, some of whom rather cold-shouldered the colonial lady.

Trying her utmost to repair her fault, the really good-natured little woman succeeded so well in making herself agreeable that Violet asked them both to stay on for lunch, to see the

palm-house, and afterwards have a game of billiards. Jack stayed too ; Rufus having gleefully fitted him with a coat that was decidedly loose and undeniably shabby, its worthy owner being far from as particular in his dress as its present wearer.

‘Doesn’t he look a fine man in it, now, ladies? Faith, Ramsay, I’m only afraid you’ll be wanting to borrow a portmanteau from me as well,’ cried O’Brien, with a significant wink, as he surveyed the appearance of his friend.

‘I am afraid Violet has been a little hoydenish this morning. You know, that is her chief temptation in her situation ; so I do trust you will not encourage her in any more escapades,’ murmured Kate O’Brien, presently, in Jack’s ear, as she swept round the billiard-table with a queenly air.

‘What? In falling from slippery places? Certainly not—I mean to avoid them myself in future, Mrs. O’Brien, if I can,’ promptly returned Jack, feeling secretly annoyed, but successfully disguising it. ‘Your ball is spot, I believe ; on the opposite side, there.’

‘Ah, I thought it was the white one,’ said Kate, carelessly, aloud. Then, in a quick, reproachful whisper: ‘You have hardly spoken a word to me. What is the reason? Are you *angry* with me?’

‘No reason at all; only one must try to be generally agreeable to a hostess and her guests, I suppose. By-the-way, where is your friend, Cyril Vyvian, gone?’

‘I neither know nor care. Why do you always vex me about him? *You*, at least, have no right to be jealous of *him*, poor fellow. And, as to your duty to your hostess, it seems to me you had sufficient opportunity to pay it this morning. It is not kind to remind me that I am only a nonentity in this house.’

Jack inwardly sighed, even while his companion’s great, lustrous eyes burned upon him. He tried to soothe Mrs. O’Brien’s offended feelings by some vague compliments. He was too angry with her to do more, and was bitterly aware he dared not approach Violet much while that jealous gaze was upon him. At last he found his chance, when they gathered, towards

five o'clock, in the wainscoted hall, where the leaping flames of a great pile of ash-billets in the wide, old-fashioned fire-place were reflected in the beautiful Queen Anne silver of the tea-table equipage.

Violet, in a dark-green velvet dress, that became her wonderfully, setting off her pretty brown hair and fair complexion, had just finished pouring out tea, when Jack at last was able to draw near her.

‘Ah! Captain Ramsay, now you deserve a cup for yourself. Can you tell me, has everyone else had——?’

‘Yes; everyone else has had tea, and buttered toast, and hot cake, and all the rest of it,’ interrupted Jack. ‘You are the only person to whose wants you are not attending at all; you always come last, I believe.’

‘Of course. Is it not my duty to look after all my friends and guests first?’

‘O, —— duty!’ murmured Jack, in a disgusted tone; then, persuasively, ‘Are you not tired, now, of your constant duties? You once told me you were sometimes. *I am!* No one

can ever get a word with you, with all these people about, except by chance. Could we not all run up to town for a few days, and have a good time? Come; say you will.'

'It would be delightful,' answered Violet, nervously playing with the tea-cups; and, though she spoke hesitatingly, her eyes were sparkling.

'What are you two plotting together?' asked Kate, approaching with her empty tea-cup, and passing one arm round Violet's waist.

'Something I was just wanting you to back me up in,' replied Jack, with mendacious effrontery. 'I was telling Miss Vyvian that, as the horses are idle in the stables; and the hounds in the kennel; and the weather abominable; why should we not all go up to town for a dance, or to some theatres? *You* will be on my side, Mrs. O'Brien, I am sure.'

'It would be delightful,' replied Kate, decidedly; and her eyes sparkled, too.

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE NEW CLUB.

CURIOSLY enough, though Violet had been slow to accede to the London plan, no sooner had Mrs. O'Brien declared for it, than the girl became the more eager of the two. Meanwhile, her handsome duenna, in a few hours, began decidedly to cool.

Violet—who had sent an urgent message that Margaret Beaumont *must* join them, which Jack undertook to convey, promising to ensure its success—was quite distressed that night on finding Kate seated moodily alone in her boudoir. Hardly deigning to look up, the latter said, with an evident thunder-cloud hanging over her dark brows,

‘As you have Mrs. Beaumont to go with you to town, Violet, she will be quite a sufficient chaperon without me. I have been talking to Rufus, and think, on the whole, I had better stay behind.’

‘But, Kate, why not? It will not be the same thing, at all, if you don’t come,’ cried Violet, affectionately, in dismay. ‘What is the matter? Why, you seemed so keen about it, at first.’

‘The matter is, only—that I have no clothes. You don’t wish me to disgrace your party, I suppose? but of course I cannot vie with an heiress, or a lucky widow, like you and Mrs. Beaumont, in the matter of dress.’

‘My dear Kate, you must be joking. Why, there is your black dress you wore with poinsettias, and that you looked so splendid in the other night, as Cyril said. And your white satin, and——’ expostulated Violet, laughing.

‘Thank you!’ interrupted Mrs. O’Brien, vehemently, almost angrily. ‘You are as bad as Rufus, who, whenever I complain, only says, “Well, my dear, if you haven’t a rag to put on

your back, as you say, still in my opinion you are the best-dressed woman I see in any room." It is so stingy of him. He doesn't care; but I vow I will not go in those shabby old gowns! They are utterly dowdy.' Kate wiped her eyes; then added, more gently, 'There, dear; don't mind my little worries. Go and enjoy yourselves in town. I am only a poor earthen pot, who has no right to try to sail down-stream along with the iron ones.'

'Nonsense, dear Kate; don't talk like that. Of course we could never enjoy ourselves without you. O, you must come. And, as for the dresses, let me help in that little difficulty. We will pay a visit to Madame Blanche the first thing,' was Violet's gay rejoinder, who was really touched by Kate's affliction, and believed her friend was firmly resolved to keep her word.

Kate held back from accepting this generous offer, but Violet insisted. At last, with warmest assurances of gratitude, Mrs. O'Brien allowed herself to be persuaded, and her young hostess left triumphant.

'Poor Kate!' was Violet's reflection as she

went somewhat slowly to her own room. 'In her place, I think I should try to be more economical for poor Rufus' sake. Her dresses are really quite good—but there! she can't help her nature, and she is miserable unless she is better dressed than any of us. Heigho! we all have our faults.'

Then Violet turned to happier thoughts, and remembering Jack's whisper, 'One never can get a word with you, except by chance,' began dreaming of what it would be like in town with *him*. O, pleasures of hope! how they rival pleasures of memory.

'After all,' said Kate, confidentially, next day to Miss Vyvian, as all the party stood collected at the little Forde station, awaiting the up-train, 'after all, dear, I am very glad I agreed to come with you. People might have gossiped down here, you know, if you had gone up with Mrs. Beaumont alone, and her cousin.'

'I should pay no attention to that sort of nonsense,' was Violet's answer, given carelessly; but she felt secretly vexed.

They all made the most of their time. Kate

got her dresses, and then Violet felt half obliged, half urged thereto by Madame Blanche, to treat herself likewise; 'not to look less smart than her friend,' said the dressmaker; 'to please Jack's eyes,' thought Violet herself.

They went to Kempton; to the winter exhibitions; and each night, after dining together, to the theatre. Jack had made up the party to six, by introducing a friend. This was Major Ball, an ex-hussar and a jovial, horsey little man, who instantly succumbed to Kate's charms and left Ramsay more free to be with the fair girl he most cared for. And yet, after all, Jack had not such good luck as he had expected. At dinner general fun and talk across their little table naturally took place, with only their party of half-a-dozen. At theatres he had more chance. Yet, even there, Kate always contrived he should sit between herself and Violet; and how could a man hazard any very tender remark or compliment to one girl with the great ostrich fan of her jealous friend always waving close to his ear, and Kate's laugh of high animal spirits, and her rich, rather loud voice,

claiming his attention every other minute, while her dark eyes flashed every now and then round searchingly upon him.

One night 'Rip van Winkle' was revived, and they went to see it.

'You are very quiet this evening,' Jack presently contrived to say to Violet unheard. 'You look even sad.'

'Do I? See how honest I am. This play does make me a little sad, I confess. One can't help thinking how many Rip van Winkles there are in life who come back and *don't* find things as they were.'

'Yes. It has a peculiar significance for a soldier,' answered Jack, low. 'If I were to go to India (which is pretty much the same thing as being lost in sleep, or otherwise, to all those I care for), I wonder *what* changes I should find among my friends?'

'None in me. I should remain the same,' Violet answered, very low. Then, after a moment or two of silence, during which she seemed to divine that her words had sunk deep into Jack's mind, she added louder, rousing

herself to mirthfulness again, 'Only, most likely, I should be a trifle stouter, and heavier in the saddle. Will it look well, I wonder, to see Violet Vyvian, M.F.H. of the Marshwood Vale Hounds, still, when she is a grey-haired, old maid?'

'It is not necessary to assume you will be *that*. You may marry.'

'It is more than unlikely, unless—— No! If you go away, you will find me Violet Vyvian still when you return.'

They were interrupted at that moment by Major Ball, who eagerly announced,

'Do listen to the piece now, Miss Vyvian. There is such an awfully touching part coming.'

Violet never heard the answer that was trembling on Jack's lips, which would have touched her infinitely more than any words of the play. He had no opportunity of finding out what she meant by that word, '*unless——*,' she had so quickly broken off. Did it mean unless a better man than Lord Guisard appeared? Or could it be that she meant, unless she decided to give up home and fortune, all but a mere five hundred

a-year, for the sake of some man she should love better than house or lands? The word haunted him.

On the Wednesday night, after they had been almost a week in town, news came that the frost was nearly gone. But Jack urged them all so strongly to stay for a dance at the New Club, of which he was a member, that they consented, not unwillingly.

A good many guests had already arrived, as Ramsay escorted his party through the hall and downstairs into the ball-room.

‘How pretty!’ exclaimed Violet, looking at the polished parquet that replaced what must have been a very different scene in the days of Evans’, and at the Oriental-looking galleries overhead. ‘And what a delicious floor! I am longing for a dance.’

‘Come now, then; and let me have this first waltz,’ said Jack; as the orchestra on the stage, with its pretty drop-scene of Indian jungle, began the strains of Strauss’s last, best waltz.

Several pairs of eyes followed them admiringly, as they glided over the floor that was

smooth as glass. Violet was looking her very best in an exquisite dress of clouds of pale terra-cotta tulle, caught here and there with bunches of shaded azaleas, her chief ornament being a heavy diamond snake round her neck. She had a very graceful neck, which, with the pretty droop of her wonderfully white shoulders, was one of her chief charms.

Mrs. O'Brien watched them with a strange, fixed, almost glassy look in her dark eyes; a little line came between her brows, and a faintly redder tinge to her cheeks. Then she turned to Major Ball, who was waiting for her, looking very like an expectant terrier watching for a playmate to throw a stone, or begin a game of romps, and away they started, too. Rufus and Margaret Beaumont, who were 'taking it easy' on a sofa under a side-gallery, laughed as they watched the little major bounding in energetically in the dance, his coat-tails flying, his short moustache seeming to bristle, and his snub-nose to rise and expand with exhilaration. Kate was looking superb in a white dress with heavy embroideries, and three large

diamond stars in her dark hair. These were Vyvian jewels, lent her by Violet, who did not like her friend to be less fine than herself.

‘You are looking grand to-night. Upon my word you are—just like a queen among them all. Not one can hold a candle to you,’ uttered the little major, with jerky enthusiasm, as they paused.

Kate smiled, O! so sweetly upon him; none could have guessed how bitterly she was thinking in her heart if Jack’s voice had said those words to her, how greedily her ears would have drunk in the compliment. She deceived Jack himself and Violet, who were by chance looking her way at that instant.

‘Those two seem very happy together, you see; so you may just as well give me the next dance. What does it matter if we dance a good deal together to-night? As you said before, you can do as you please in London—the only question is, do you please?’

‘To dance with you? Of course I do,’ softly, yet half-hesitatingly answered Violet, who thought it simply paradisaical, and would have

most likely done so even had not Ramsay danced almost as well as he rode. In her heart she was frightened—it was such a pleasure to be with him! Where would this lead her? She could not pause to think. She *must* enjoy herself, be perfectly happy with him this one night.

Tra-lir-a! tra-lira-la! went the music; on went the dancers. Once, twice, Jack had forced himself to a sense of duty and danced with Kate O'Brien. He had also more gladly taken his cousin Margaret out of her corner, who, he knew, had come to that peacefully discriminating period of life when a woman prefers quality to quantity in her partners, and gently observes she does care for a little dancing, but that it must be good. Kate's simmering jealousy could not be altogether restrained when at last she had Jack to herself.

‘So you are coming back to hunt with the Marshwood Vale again? I thought we might perhaps have to say good-bye to you to-morrow, Captain Ramsay.’

Jack faced round and met Kate's dark, mean-

ing glance with his blood immediately warming up.

‘I am coming down again, most certainly. Have you any objection, Mrs. O’Brien? Don’t you know I always meant to come?’

‘How could *I* have any objection?’ murmured Kate, with a soft, slow glance from which Jack turned away his own, and a low sigh he feigned not to hear. ‘I thought we were too great friends for you to ask me that. No . . . only I feared something might have prevented you—and, believe me, I should be so sorry in that case; very, very sorry.’

‘It is too kind of you to express so much regret at a mythical case,’ returned Jack, with a not very pleasant ring of voice. He knew well enough what she meant: that he might propose, and would be refused this night by Violet; then good-bye to Marshwood Vale. ‘Shall we take another turn?’

‘He is further gone than I feared,’ thought Kate, in her heart; and, though she generally danced well, her feet seemed to lag under her as if weighted with lead. Then again, as she

felt Jack's arm round her waist and his breath at times on her cheek—'He has not spoken to her yet. I must be cautious, but I *will* stop him. He shall not put me aside for her.' No thought of poor Violet's generosity, the costly gown on Kate's back, the diamonds in her hair, softened the latter's wrathful resolve. Even at the same moment, Jack was as hotly declaring within himself,

'She wants to put me off. By heavens! I won't delay any longer. I will speak to Violet this very evening.'

Strange that two people should be so near, and yet no intimation of the opposing thoughts in the minds of either be perceived by the other. Perhaps in a better sphere thought may be divined without its medium (too often its mask) of speech. What true and good thoughts they would needs be, not to be disowned or repented of!

It was some little time before Jack Ramsay was able to get another dance from Violet, to whom Major Ball had introduced several men with impulsive kind-heartedness, jerkily assur-

ing her, almost before they had got out of earshot, that they were 'tremendously gone.' Jack felt inclined to swear inwardly at his officious friend; as it was, he grumbled between his teeth, 'What did you do that for?'

'Why, my dear fellow, girls like, I tell you, to know all the best men in a room. Mrs. O'Brien asked me if I didn't know young Ermine and some others. She confided in me they both could not dance all night with you and me—don't see why not, myself; and so I told her.'

'All right,' curtly nodded Jack. As Ermine was a prospective peer, though only a big, smooth-faced youth as yet, his feelings were hardly mollified towards Kate. Nevertheless, he asked her to dance again, 'to get it over,' he mentally settled; then Violet should be his partner for the rest of the precious remaining time. Mrs. O'Brien beamed upon him. Her words were as honey, her smiles ought to have melted any man's anger. They did seem to affect Jack's brain: he grew confused, and weaker in his distrust.

‘You are not vexed with me, for any little hint I dropped just now,’ Kate ventured at last to murmur, feeling more sure of him. ‘Believe me, that with all my heart and soul I would do, and even suffer, anything that would help *your* happiness. Trust me!—tell me, *can* I help it?’

She had dared too much. Jack started, for that passionate declaration might be taken two ways. He was on his guard again, and replied, laughing with forced carelessness,

‘I don’t need your help at present, but many thanks for kind intentions, all the same. When I do want it, Mrs. O’Brien, you may be sure I shall come for it.’ (‘And that day will be far off!’ he added, in his heart.)

At last—at last Jack’s patience was rewarded. Violet was once more his partner. After a turn or two, Ramsay stopped abruptly.

‘Have you danced enough? Shall we go upstairs and sit this out?’

Violet assented, with a sudden consciousness that something was coming, and her heart suddenly fluttered like a little startled bird with-

in her. They had paused near one of the cunning, small, winding stairs, leading from either end of the ball-room to the galleries above. Mutely both young people went up it, after each other, feeling as solemn as never before in their lives. The awful thought was pressing on Jack's mind, how terribly much he was going to ask this pure young girl to give up for his sake. Violet, on her part, was inspired with that enthusiasm of self-sacrifice which will make a woman delight in proving the greatness of her attachment to the man she loves. Yet she knew at the same time it *was* much, very much, she must renounce for his sake—and she was, let it be owned, a little sorry.

They sat down in two, low, wicker chairs by a little table, but their eyes were fixed on the floor, not on the dancers in the hall below.

For a few minutes Jack could not utter a word. Violet sat silent likewise, and played nervously with her fan. She knew, now, the decisive moment was coming. The silence was intensely trying to them both.

At last Jack pulled himself together, and

looked straight with his true, dark-grey eyes, at the girl he loved.

‘Miss Vyvian, you said something this evening about your not marrying, *unless*——’

‘Yes. I remember,’ was the almost voiceless answer.

‘Will you tell me what you meant——?’ Jack had bent forward in his intense earnestness, his glance striving to read Violet’s soul. Up popped a dark head, crowned with three diamond stars, close beside them.

‘Dear me, this is as bad as what do you call it—a ship’s companion,’ exclaimed Mrs. O’Brien’s voice, with much gaiety. ‘And, I declare, here are two other companions! You both look as solemn as a pair of owls. Are you hungry for supper, Captain Ramsay; for *I* am, I must honestly confess.’

‘If you can exist till the end of this dance,’ replied Jack, grimly, to the beautiful vision that stood over him, ‘I shall be happy to do my duties as host.’

‘Very well! Major Ball, we must be patient. Here are two nice chairs close by. Have a

cigarette if you like. I love to do at Rome as the Romans do. Would it be correct for me to smoke myself in this delightfully free-and-easy place, I wonder.'

Thereupon the little major cheerfully lit up, and added some more delicate fumes to the occasional odour of cigars around.

'Might we not as well go down to supper, Captain Ramsay?' whispered Violet, presently, feeling that any change would now be preferable to this proximity of their too-kind friends.

Jack agreed glumly enough; he saw there was no more chance for him that night.

'Quite a dainty little feed for old thingamymjig, what-d'ye-call-him?—Lucullus,' observed Major Ball gaily, as the Heidseick sparkled in their glasses. 'And ain't we a lively little party?'

'O! we are,' uttered Rufus warmly, with a comic glance at his neighbour's minute proportions. Yes! they were all very gay. And, beyond the rest, Jack and Violet strove to show quite especial exhilaration. Unfortunately, the effort did not prevent Mrs. Beaumont from saying, with sweet denseness,

‘Violet, you are tired, dear. You look quite pale. Do let us go home, now, after supper.’ And, as Mrs. O’Brien agreed very decidedly, the party broke up in spite of Violet’s faint protestations.

Next morning early, they all went down together to the Forde station again.

CHAPTER X.

‘IT’S FOR YOU.’

AFTER the interruption of the frost, and the diversion of going to London, ‘business,’ as Rufus O’Brien termed it, began again at Forde. Which is to say that hunting was resumed, and pursued steadily three days a week with unflagging zeal, not only by their fair M.F.H., but by almost all the members of the Marshwood Vale Hunt; certainly by those who stabled their horses at the great house of Forde Manor, or the smaller whitewashed one of Littleforde nestling under the shelter of its big neighbour.

Jack Ramsay had more than ever, on return-

ing, dropped into an accustomed place among them all. He was of a very domestic nature; and having had no real home of his own for some years, no mother now to rejoice in her boy's return, no sister to alternately pet and scold him, and likewise be loftily 'looked after' by his superior self—for his only and dearly-loved one was wooed and married, and off to a far distant land—he attached himself all the more warmly to Margaret, his cousin, and little Dolly. They supplied the home affection; and up yonder, beyond the park woods, was the object of his deepest man's love. What more could he want?

Violet was busy writing to her agent one afternoon, full of the pious feeling that 'virtue is its own reward.' She hated writing at that particular time. Jack Ramsay had just come up for a game of tennis on the asphalte court, and she could hear his voice and Kate O'Brien's higher tones ringing through the open window as they were having a grand rally.

Violet would have given a good deal to be out with them; but 'duty is *duty*,' as she said to

herself, with a disgusted wrinkle of her nose, wishing that she could truthfully feel ‘duty is pleasure.’ Her letter was about a sudden matter of some importance, on which she was obliged to consult her man of business, and the post was soon going out.

‘Lord Guisard,’ a servant announced, throwing open the door.

Violet was obliged to rise and play the hostess, with an apologetic explanation.

‘Will you not join the tennis-party outside? you will find Mrs. O’Brien there, and I am certain she will be charmed to have you as a partner,’ said the girl, sweetly. ‘Unfortunately, for a few minutes longer, I must make use of my pen, instead of brandishing a tennis-bat.’

‘I’d rather wait for *you*. I don’t want Mrs. O’Brien for a partner. I’ll sit here,’ said his lordship, gruffly; he had one of those voices that never attempt the least pleasant change of intonation, but always emit just the same monotonous note.

‘I never knew a man put so many I’s into his sentences,’ thought Violet, resuming her

writing. But her train of elaborate instructions was disturbed. There was a certain air of solemnity about the visitor, and an emphasis in his words that gave Miss Vyvian an uncomfortable presentiment; and presently, after some hesitating thought, she glanced cautiously round at her noble guest. He was lolling in a deep arm-chair, and having taken out a costly 'Thornhill' pocket-knife was engaged in whittling a wart on his left hand.

Violet returned to her letter, and slowly finished a paragraph. Lord Guisard, with a great yawn, had turned on his other side, and was jingling all the loose coin in his pocket, looking particularly fat and ungraceful as he did so.

'He is a perfect Tom Tiddler's ground—wants to make me remember how rich he is,' thought our heiress, with fine scorn.

A little more business-letter. The guest was now admiring a row of thick gold rings on his fat fingers. They were so many that the famed Lady of Banbury Cross could hardly have roused envy in his bosom; indeed, they so

covered the joints of his podgy digits that these stuck somewhat stiffly out. Next an eighty-guinea watch was taken forth, opened, examined, snapped, turned over and over.

‘O! bother the man. If he were to sit for half-an-hour a day for a week in my sitting-room, I should go perfectly crazy before Sunday,’ thought Miss Vyvian. And if ever any faintest suggestions, months ago, as to the possibility of fulfilling her dear, whimsical, old father’s wishes by marrying Lord Guisard had crossed her mind, the present experience of such a companion would most rapidly have dispelled them.

There! Thank goodness the signature was dashed off, the envelope fastened. One last peep out of the ‘tail’ of Violet’s eyes. The elaborate pocket-knife was once more in request, and his lordship’s wart receiving fresh attention.

Violet rose with an air of brisk determination, and rang the bell, giving her letter to a servant.

‘And now, Lord Guisard, shall we come out

and join the rest? You would like a game of tennis, I know.'

'Then you know all wrong. I don't care for either Captain Ramsay or Mrs. O'Brien,' returned his lordship, with that engaging candour for which he was famous, especially towards ladies. In men's society he was of a silent turn, some said sullen. Suddenly he remembered that after lunch his mother, when sending him out to victory, had warned him to lose no time in cutting out that young soldier in Violet's favour, but '*not* to show any jealousy.' And, whatever his other faults, Guisard had a profound respect for that terrible old lady; and considerable belief in her sagacity. So he graciously added,

'I don't mind that gunner. He's not a bad fellow, I think; but I did not come here to visit Mrs. O'Brien. My mother says she is a person she does not like, at all.'

'Indeed——?' ejaculated Violet; so taken aback at this sudden attack on her friend and chaperon, she found nothing else to say.

‘No. My mother never approved of her manners from the first. Now she is very fond of *you*, and told me to give you her love to-day.’

‘Really!’ (Miss Vyvian was longing to say, ‘*You do me proud!*’ The corners of her mouth were twitching sarcastically, but she refrained. At the same time, Violet did not despise the compliment as coming from the old viscountess. Indeed, she had rather a liking for the bitter-tongued, shrewd, old woman, who was so honest that the girl believed no amount of wealth in a prospective daughter-in-law would have induced her to sham the least amount of liking that she did not really feel.)

‘I am sorry Lady Guisard does not care for my friend,’ Violet thought it better to add in a light tone, but with a serious expression, ‘However, as Mrs. O’Brien is my friend, and likely to live with me still a long time, don’t you think we had better drop the subject?’

‘But she can’t live with you when you’re married. By Jove! no man would stand that,’

expostulated his lordship. 'She has such a doosid disagreeable manner—thinks herself so awfully clever. O! come—I—I—I——'

'There is no need to discuss such an event, Lord Guisard,' freezingly.

'I don't know that; I—I don't, upon my word,' responded his lordship, jocularly, fixing his eyeglass, and then staring favourably upon the happy maiden whom he had privately marked as his own. 'Time you had somebody to look after you better than this Irish fellow O'Brien. Fine old name; no one to come after you; everybody thinks it's an awful pity.'

Violet controlled her annoyance and attempted a smile, though it was not a brilliant success.

'I am afraid it would not quite do. The truth is, Lord Guisard, I am very fond of my own way, so that I prefer being certain of getting it.'

'I see. Quite right—I don't blame you. Just what my mother said; that you've been your own mistress long enough, now, to make you take the bit between your teeth if anyone tried to drive you. I like it—fine spirit.' Then,

after pausing to take fresh courage, he tried another plunge.

‘Come; look here, Miss Vyvian, I’ll tell you what it is, if you won’t hang away from the pole too much and will go up to your collar, I think I and you would run very well in double harness together. I’d hunt the hounds, and we’d send that old driveller Tom Harkholler about his business. Lots of fellows like me sell their titles only for tin, but I’ve lots of that, and a nice girl of good family, as my mother says—’ But the remainder of his sentence was cut short as Violet rose flushing with anger and pride.

‘Lord Guisard,’ she said, controlling her feelings with difficulty, ‘what do you mean by speaking to me in this manner? You are going too far; and presuming in a way that seems most strange. You forget yourself, my lord.’

‘You are angry about your favourite old Tom; I might have known it. Well, there, there; we won’t say any more about it. Can’t you talk sensibly to a man without flying out in that way and kicking over the traces?’

His lordship looked so rueful, and there was such a comical element in the whole incident, that Violet saw only the ludicrous side of the proposal. And, believing that her suitor had accepted his refusal with as good a grace as could be expected of him, she sought at once to soften the blow to his vanity, with her usual good-hearted desire to spare the feelings of all who were brought into contact with herself in daily life.

So she sat down again with more confidence, saying kindly,

‘ Well, Lord Guisard, I will forgive you this time ; but please don’t talk any more nonsense to me. I don’t suppose you came here merely to pay me empty compliments. Come, tell me all your news, and how is Lady Guisard’s rheumatism ?’

‘ Ah, girl of sense ! Recovered your temper, I’m glad to see. O, my mother’s all right—no, I mean all wrong—but she’s quite used to the pain, so I never think about it.’

Gossey, as he answered, gazed with an approving, bland smile overspreading his fat

features upon his secretly-chosen partner for life. He did not think himself refused, not a bit of it. That unlucky allusion to Tom Harkholler had nearly spoilt the whole affair, but he had cleverly extricated himself, so he considered. Little dreaming of the honours still condescendingly held out to her grasp, Violet proceeded absently,

‘And so you don’t care for lawn-tennis? I am sorry, for I am very fond of it, and was going to propose that we should join the others for a game.’

Her eyes were overlooking his lint-white poll, gazing to where out yonder, at the end of the tennis-court, she could just see a straight, tall form in white flannels. What a contrast was there! She roused, with a start, to the consciousness that Lord Guisard was progressing along the sofa on which he was sitting and thus approaching the end nearest her own chair; ‘galumphing’ onwards, as ‘Alice in Wonderland’ has it, by sidelong movements.

‘I’ve something to show you—do you like it, eh?’ and fumbling with obese struggles in one

pocket he produced a little leather jewel-case, and opening it displayed a diamond ring.

‘I am no judge of stones. Your lordship is such a connoisseur in rings, I daresay it is a fine one,’ said Violet, coldly ; feeling really nervous in her heart, and wishing she was out of the situation. Next moment, to her horror, she found her left hand caught fast, whilst Lord Guisard attempted to put the ring on her fourth finger with heavy gallantry.

‘It’s for you. Engaged finger, you know.’

Up sprang Violet and tried to free herself in dismay. Lord Guisard, mistaking the action for maiden coyness, still insisted. Then, with an angry sweep of her hand, Violet tore off the ring that fell and thence bounded away.

‘I say, confound it, you’ve gone and lost it ! It’s one of London and Ryder’s too, that I got down on approbation,’ uttered Guisard, after a moment or two of infuriated silence, growing as red as a turkey-cock.

‘I’m dreadfully sorry. Shall I help you to find it?’ apologised Violet, so thankful to see that her suitor must now understand his defeat,

that she would not quarrel with his manner of taking his rejection.

‘It’s all you can do, now,’ growled the discomfited swain.

Forthwith, Violet went down on her knees, to search in the furthest corner of the room, while Goosey grovelled on hands and knees under a round table, muttering,

‘Cost a hundred and forty-five. Daresay there will be a stone out.’

The door opened at that moment to admit three radiant people, to wit, Kate O’Brien, Jack, and Rufus.

‘I have won three pairs of gloves, Violet,’ cried the first.

‘Is that letter not finished yet, Miss Vyvian? We’ve come to insist——’ and Jack broke off short.

‘Mother of Moses!’ muttered Rufus, with a wide grin, as all three stood gazing at the scene.

‘Lord Guisard has just dropped one of his rings—here it is! I’ve found it,’ explained Violet, rising, flushed but triumphant.

Kate darted forward to inspect the object of search.

‘What a sweet ring, but so small! What little hands you must have, Lord Guisard. I should have thought this only fit for a lady’s finger. See!—it fits mine;’ and she held it up with a provoking air of playful malice.

‘Give it back to me,’ growled Goosey, scrambling up from his plantigrade attitude, and advancing, with extreme alacrity, upon his fair tormentor.

If scowls could kill, Mrs. O’Brien, as she afterwards declared, would have been slain there and then. As, however, to tease him still further, she persistently gazed with admiring scrutiny at her prize, he promptly snatched the ring himself from her finger.

Kate gave a little cry of partly mock pain.

‘Oh—you quite hurt me! How can you be so violent, Lord Guisard? Did you imagine I wished to *steal* your ring? I declare, I would not be your wife for worlds. Indeed, I should think you will find it pretty difficult to get *any*

girl to marry you, if you maltreat us poor women in this manner.'

Jack and Rufus, by this time, could hardly keep their countenances; merely to look at the evidently rejected lover's face was enough to make them almost explode with laughter.

'We were just going out to have a game of lawn-tennis with you all; were we not? Shall we come now?' put in Violet, coming to the rescue, and looking appealingly at Kate, to stop her sport of live-lord baiting. But Goosey would not be appeased.

'No, thank you, Miss Vyvian. I believe *I* have stayed in this house long enough.'

And, presenting a limp hand to his hostess, to be touched if she chose to so please herself, while bestowing only a nod and wrathful glance upon the other occupants of the room, on whose faces he detected gleams of their secret mirth, his lordship slouched out of the door.

Kate fairly clapped her hands.

'Well, that is the greatest treat I have had for ages. I don't know when I have enjoyed anything so much. My dearest Violet, I would

have given worlds to have seen you give him his *congé*; it must have been a delicious scene!’

‘I think Miss Vyvian has already wasted more of her afternoon on our friend Guisard than he deserves. Come out now—I have just played three sets with Mrs. O’Brien—won’t you play with me, in your turn?’ interrupted Jack Ramsay, his eyes shining down on Violet with a look in which gladness, approval, fun, but a wish to shield her from all further petty annoyance at present were blended.

‘One suitor off the list,’ checked Kate, thoughtfully, upon her fingers, as she remained behind.

CHAPTER XI.

'TRYING A YOUNG 'UN.'

THE shortest month in the year had nearly sped, and every day the so-called platonic friendship that Jack and Violet had mutually agreed upon was fast merging on either side into a warmer and stronger feeling.

Seldom a day passed without their meeting. Jack had usually some good excuse for going up to Forde Manor. One day it was to go over the kennels, or see a puppy that had unexpectedly come in from walk; another to take Violet a note from Margaret Beaumont; or, if no other excuse offered itself, he wanted to have a smoke and a chat with Rufus.

Violet, on her part too, was a constant visitor at Littleforde ; village charities, and many other matters in which she and Mrs. Beaumont were equally interested, furnished her with a pretext for visiting that lady ; and so these two drifted on and on—getting to see more and care more for each other than either would have dared to acknowledge—and gradually learning to watch for each other's advent with an eagerness that could hardly be attributed to mere friendship. Yes, it was the old, old story of two beings of opposite sex, with tastes much in common, being more and more attracted towards each other, drifting along the quiet stream of friendship out into the deep sea of love, and beginning to think life but dreary work when they were separated.

Almost imperceptibly, during the last fortnight, Violet had got into the way of asking Jack for advice on many points, not only connected with the management of her business affairs, but of her stable. She did not for a moment doubt or mistrust good, honest Rufus. Still, somehow, she always fancied she 'should

just like to have Captain Ramsay's opinion,' as she argued with herself. And so Jack had been consulted on more points than one ; and had, on one occasion, been able, through a city friend, to put not only Violet, but Rufus and Mrs. Beaumont, up to an uncommonly good investment, an incident that made Rufus also entertain feelings of gratitude towards him and respect his judgment. This, coupled with the sentiments that Violet as well as Kate felt for Jack, combined to make him a universal favourite at Forde Manor, and, thenceforth, he came to be regarded as one of the community.

One day Jack had walked up to Forde Manor with a setting of eggs from prize poultry that Violet was particularly anxious to possess, and having handed them over to that young lady, and assisted her in placing them under a hen (not a very congenial occupation for a dashing horse-artilleryman!—but what will not men do when stricken by the dart of that mischief-loving god, Eros?) had been asked to stay to lunch ; of which invitation he gladly availed himself.

Towards the close of that pleasant meal, a footman came in with a message that a farmer had brought over a horse for Violet to see.

‘Rather late in the season isn’t it, Miss Vyvian, to add to your stud?’ questioned Jack.

‘Yes, perhaps it is; but you know I lamed poor old Trumpeter the other day, and I must have something to take his place and finish the season on. Besides, I have seen this horse going very well; and as Wilford is a tenant of mine, and times are bad, I should be glad to do him a good turn and buy the horse if he suited me,’ replied Violet.

‘Ah! you are a model landlord!’ laughed Jack, ‘and, I presume, hold the opinion that those who want horses ought to buy straight from the breeder, and put into his pocket the dealer’s commission! and a very laudable opinion it is, too.’

‘Yes,’ interrupted Rufus, ‘Violet is always right, and I should be glad if Wilford could sell this animal, for he is a real good one and a rare fencer.’

‘Come along then,’ said Violet, rising from

the table. 'If you all will go and look the horse over, I will just run upstairs, slip on my habit, and meet you in the stable-yard.'

In a few minutes she joined the rest of the party, who were engaged in critically examining the animal in question—a dark, well-bred four-year-old iron-grey, well up to thirteen stone. He was a fairly-shaped horse, and would, no doubt, in time develop into a good hunter, but, rough and ragged as he was, did not look very attractive. Violet had, however, seen the horse going well in a fast run; and, moreover, noticed that he was clever as well as temperate at his fences.

'Good afternoon, Mr. Wilford,' she remarked, on joining the group. 'So you have brought the grey up for me to see? I suppose you won't mind my getting on him and trying him over a few fences?'

'Lor bless 'ee, no, miss,' returned the jolly farmer. 'Yew can keep 'un and try 'un for a week, if yew be so minded—though I du think five minnuts 'll be enough for yew, miss; but do 'ee get on 'un, and if yew can put 'un down,

dang it all! I'll give 'un to ye,' he added, with emphasis, slapping his thigh.

Jack and Rufus, who had been examining the horse carefully, having expressed their approval of him, Violet ordered a groom to fetch her saddle. Whilst it was being brought, Jack said, in a low tone,

‘I wish you would let me get on the horse first, Miss Vyvian, and just see what sort of mouth he has, before you try him; even if he doesn't quite suit you, he may do for me.’

‘O! certainly. Mr. Wilford,’ turning to that worthy, ‘you will not mind Captain Ramsay trying the horse first, will you? If he does not suit me, perhaps the captain may deal with you.’

No objection being made, Jack was soon on the grey's back, and made for a paddock at the back of the stables, which formed part of the home-farm of Forde Manor. The animal moved freely and well, and, once on the turf, trotted away with wiry and corky action. Round the paddock Jack took him, the horse bending and giving to his hand in a manner he hardly ex-

pected, for raw young horses straight from a farmer's stable are not generally the most perfectly bitted animals in the world. Violet looked on with admiration as she noticed the horse's true level action, and she felt a keen desire to be on his back. In the hands of such a finished horseman as Ramsay, the horse certainly looked his best; and Violet had been too constantly amongst horses, and ridden too much herself, to be influenced in her judgment by the grey's somewhat rough exterior. Jack now walked the horse back to the end of the paddock, which was somewhat long and narrow, preparatory to extending him, and testing his jumping-powers.

There was a sort of little steeplechase course of natural fences laid out round the farm about a mile in length, and consisting of eight or nine fences, including a small brook. This was used for schooling young horses, and often proved useful in trying a fresh animal over. Round this course Jack now proposed to take the grey. On reaching the end of the paddock he turned the horse round, and cantered down to the first

fence, a small flying one with a ditch on the landing-side. This the grey swung over in his stride, and then Jack, with a slight pressure of the knees, increased his pace. The next fence was a single bank, and to this succeeded a couple more easy fences, all of which the horse jumped in good form. The fifth obstacle was a really good stiff double—broad on the top, certainly, but pleached with stout unbending binders, and a wide ditch on each side. A big jump, in fact; but, if taken quietly and temperately, not an unfair one.

As the grey approached it he cocked his ears, and, just for an instant quickening his stride, landed lightly on the top, dwelt for a moment, then launched safely out over the ditch on the far side, and went sailing on in his stride.

‘Well done, young ’un,’ said Jack, leaning forward and patting the horse’s arched neck. ‘Now,’ added he, ‘we have only to see how you like timber and water, and, if you do those as well as you have the other fences, I think you’ll *do*.’

Across a deep holding fallow they now went,

and the way the horse moved through dirt increased his value in Jack's eyes. He got his haunches well under him, and seemed to put his heart into it, in a manner betokening that he was possessed of staying as well as galloping powers. The fence out of the plough was small but trappy; and necessitated a horse being pulled into a walk, creeping under the overhanging branches of a tree, and then jumping over a blind ditch on to the top of a narrow bramble-covered bank nearly level with the field on the landing side. In fact, just such a place as would bring to considerable grief a good many horses with high pretensions to be called *hunters*.

Here again the grey acquitted himself to perfection, and negotiated the place in a manner quite beyond his years. The next field was a large pasture divided by a flight of stiffish post and rails, nearly four feet high, and of a toughness that betokened a horse could take no liberties with them. At one end of these there was an opening left, for they were not usually jumped during the ordinary schooling

process of the Forde Manor stud. Jack, however, was a glutton at timber, and such an opportunity was not to be neglected; so he bore away somewhat out of the beaten track. As he neared the rails, he pulled his horse into a trot, and with a deer-like bound the grey sprang cleanly and lightly over them, shaking his head and giving a snort on landing, as much as to say, 'Surely you didn't think *that* was going to stop me !'

Jack was decidedly pleased. Now only the brook remained at the end of the next field, a large sound pasture. Catching the horse tight by the head, Ramsay sent him along at his best pace, mindful of the fact that water should always be gone at fast. The grey, however, was perhaps not much accustomed to water-jumping; moreover, the afternoon sun, glinting on its placid surface, might have had a somewhat disturbing effect on his mind; for as he approached the brook his stride became shorter and shorter, and almost on the brink he swerved sharply to the left in a manner that would have unseated a less practised and experienced rider.

Jack, however, did not lose his temper, but walked the horse up to the edge of the stream and let him look at it well, while he spoke to him in soothing tones, and patted his neck. The grey stood snorting and trembling on the rush-grown bank, sniffing at the water which had for him such apparently unknown terrors ; but, reassured by the kindly tones and treatment of his rider, his fears seemed to fade away, and he evinced almost a wish to try to jump it standing. This Jack by no means intended him to do. He must swing over it in his stride, or not at all, the rider argued ; so, walking back to the end of the field, Ramsay again set him at the brook. Confidence, however, was not yet entirely restored, and two more refusals were the result. A fourth time the pair now essayed the task. The 'suaviter in modo' having thrice failed, Jack thought it time to adopt the 'fortiter in re,' and, catching the horse in a vice-like grasp, he gave him a couple of sharp digs with the spurs, muttering at the same time, '*In or over we go this time, my young friend.*' Decision and determination won

the day, and, finding further resistance useless, the grey gave up the contest, and did his best, which resulted in a great soaring bound that landed them safely on the far side.

As Jack walked the horse back to where Rufus and the O'Briens were standing grouped on a little rising knoll that commanded a good view of the course, he said,

‘Well, Miss Vyvian, I think he’ll do; he is a good little horse, and would suit you well after a little more schooling at water, which he doesn’t seem quite to understand. If you are going to try him to-day, I beg you won’t try him at that.’

‘Do you think I’m afraid?’ responded Violet, somewhat hotly, flushing up.

‘No, I don’t doubt your courage for one moment; but twelve feet of open water is what I would not like to see any sister of mine, or lady friend either, ride a raw young horse at. *Please* don’t try it. Promise me, will you?’ he added, in low and entreating tones.

‘Let me try the horse first—I don’t mind the chance of a ducking,’ broke in Kate, with an

irritating laugh and meaning glance at Jack, in tones that implied she was willing to incur risk for the sake of exhibiting her courage.

Jack merely shrugged his shoulders ; but the taunt was too much for Violet, and her decision was made on the spot. Jack, in one of his conversations with her, had said there was no quality he despised so much in man or woman as cowardice. *He*, at any rate, should never accuse her of this ; so she made no reply, but merely ordered the groom to take the horse back to the stable and put on her saddle, whilst she went indoors to write a note.

In about twenty minutes she reappeared, and Jack, as he hoisted her into the saddle, whispered,

‘*Please* don’t try the water.’

A low laugh, and saucy glance with the words, ‘You know you despise *cowards* of either sex,’ was all the reply vouchsafed to him, as she gathered up her reins, and moved on.

Jack was depressed, horribly depressed. He felt sure Violet *would* try the horse over the

brook, and he had an inward conviction that some accident would be the result. He knew Violet's courage and determination, and that, moreover, she was a good horsewoman; but still, riding a made hunter well and straight to hounds was a different thing from riding a young horse at water in cold blood without the excitement that every horse feels in the accompanying music of the pack. For this reason he determined to take a short cut to the brook, in order to be at hand should any *contretemps* occur.

‘Where are you going, Captain Ramsay?’ inquired Kate, as he turned away from where she and Rufus had taken up their position on the top of the mound.

‘O, merely down to the brook, just to see how the grey acquits himself under the lighter hand of a lady,’ replied Jack, carelessly.

Under cover of a high, hazel-topped bank which screened him from observation, he ran fast at a pace that soon brought him to the spot, and here he awaited Violet's approach. In the meantime that young lady had been

walking and trotting the grey about, much to her satisfaction, which was greatly increased by the way he galloped and jumped all the fences she asked him to try. Jack, from his post of observation, saw her land into the field across which stretched the post and rails. He, moreover, observed the grey negotiate the stiff timber in faultless style, and then he noticed Violet quicken her pace and race her horse at the water. Down they came, the horse sweeping along with true, level action, with ears pricked, and with the lesson Jack had given him evidently implanted firmly in his mind. Water was not such a hard thing to jump after all, and could not hurt or prick one! was evidently the way the matter was argued in the equine mind; and so, straight and true, he set his head for the brook, Violet sitting square and well back in her saddle with her hands down. Nearer and nearer they came; there were no signs of refusing this time, and Jack, who had been in an agony of suspense, almost began to breathe freely again—when, at the very moment the horse was preparing to take off, up jumped a

moorhen from under the flag and rush-grown bank and went skittering along the water with a croak of alarm. This was too much for the grey's nerves; all his previous courage and determination vanished in an instant at the sound and sight of this unwonted noise and apparition. He checked himself suddenly, tried to swerve; then, seeing it was too late, made a frantic, floundering side-jump, and then—there was a splash as horse and rider disappeared under water!

Jack's feelings may be more easily imagined than described as he saw the imminent danger of the woman he cared for above all else. A thousand thoughts shot through his brain; and, as he hastily threw off his coat and rushed to the spot, varied emotions caused his heart to throb, and the veins to swell out on his forehead till they seemed as if they must burst. His one great fear was that Violet might be under her horse, and by getting entangled, and dragged down by the weight of her habit, be exposed to the risk of drowning independently of such injuries as the struggling steed might

inflict on her with his hoofs. But with all this he acted coolly and calmly. And there was no plunging in, indiscriminately, in a futile and aimless manner. As the grey's head appeared above water, Ramsay shot one swift glance down stream, and then, catching sight of a bit of Violet's habit as it bulged slowly up to the surface, he slid quietly down the bank into the water. In two or three powerful strokes he grasped the girl's skirt, and half wading, half-swimming, gained the opposite shore. Once upon terra-firma, he lifted Violet's soaked and inanimate form in his arms, and carried her up the bank as well as he could; a task of no slight difficulty considering the weight of her saturated garments.

'O, God! can she be dead?' he thought, as she lay with her head hanging back—the masses of her golden-brown hair all uncoiled, dank, and dripping with moisture. 'Miss Vyvian, speak to me! Are you hurt? Oh! Violet,' he added, in agonised tones, 'can't you say one word?' but no response came from her blue lips.

Still Jack did not despair or lose his wits, but, holding her in the manner prescribed for restoring animation in the apparently drowned, after a moment or two had the satisfaction of seeing her breathe. In the meantime, Rufus and Kate, with several of the stable-men, who had been spectators of the scene at a distance, hurried down, whilst other servants soon followed with blankets and restoratives. A gate was promptly unhung, and Violet's unconscious form laid on it, and borne towards the house.

‘Get her into a warm bath, and then to bed as quickly as you can. I’ll catch the grey and go for a doctor,’ said Jack to the assembled groups who were standing horror-struck. ‘Only be sharp,’ he added, in tones of command.

In the meantime the horse, who had scrambled out on the same side of the brook, was easily caught, and jumping on his back Jack shoved him along straight across country towards the village, where the doctor resided, in a manner that astonished the quadruped. Mingled were his feelings in that quick and excited ride, and he breathed a prayer from his

heart to that Throne of Grace—before which no petition is presented in vain, even though it may not be answered in the way we wish, nor as rapidly as we desire,—that the life of this woman, who had become so very, very dear to him, might be spared.

CHAPTER XII.

DOLLY TELLS TALES.

‘CAPTAIN RAMSAY has been paying me a little visit, Violet ; and was asking how you feel this morning. And Dolly is with him, and is worrying our lives out to know may she see you ; but I don’t suppose you care to be bothered with her.’

So announced Mrs. O’Brien, the third day after Violet’s accident, coming into the pretty little room that was Miss Vyvian’s most especial sanctum. Violet had been suffering rather severely from a chill brought on by her immersion ; but she was now better, and was lying

on a sofa, looking pale but very sweet, dressed in a pretty morning wrapper.

‘Yes, but I do want to see little Dolly ; she is always welcome,’ answered Violet, quickly, half-raising herself. ‘And—if Captain Ramsay cares to come up for a few minutes, too, I don’t mind seeing him either. It will help to pass the time.’

‘Very well ; I can tell him so. Of course you know best ; but I should have thought you were hardly strong enough to have so many in the room,’ came in a rather constrained voice from Kate, as she stood still, looking down at the recumbent figure, as if waiting for this request for Ramsay’s presence to be rescinded. But Violet had a spice of quiet obstinacy in her nature, not often drawn upon, but that now she meant to use ; and, with a little malice in her still feeble smile, she returned, in an innocent tone,

‘There will only be two visitors, after all. Not more than you and Rufus, or you and Margaret Beaumont, whom I’ve seen every day twice.’

‘O, very well ! But don’t you want me to

play propriety for you, dear?' said Kate, in a nonchalant tone, moving towards the door.

'It is not necessary when Dolly is there. She is chaperon enough for a dozen people. And there will be hardly time to finish those letters for me before post—if you don't mind writing them,' still persevered Violet, gently.

Mrs. O'Brien thought it wisest to retreat from the untenable position. She was discomfited, but observed to herself,

'After all, nothing *can* be said before Dolly, if he wants to come to the point. She is such a little pitcher, and repeats everything she hears.'

(*'Come to see you!* Ah! I know better, poor Kate. You may have all the attentions of the other men, but I have his love, and I want to keep it,' thought Violet to herself, leaning back on her cushions, with a glad little smile, yet pitying her friend's illusion.)

Every dog has his day, says the old saw; and much more every girl loves to have her one happy time (as she tells herself) when she knows that she is dearest of all others

to the man her heart has secretly learnt to worship.

Presently Miss Beaumont burst gleefully into the room, her little person looking like a ball of white cashmere and swansdown, with only a small portion of rosy animated face visible under her winter bonnet.

‘How *is* ’oo?’ she exclaimed, standing on tip-toe to deliver a volley of kisses, whilst Jack, coming in very quietly behind, stood and waited his turn for a long hand-clasp, much longer than usual. Miss Dolly’s sharp eyes could not make much of that.

‘I am so glad to see you,’ went on Ramsay, sitting softly down by Violet’s couch, and hardly taking his eyes off the sweet face so near him; still his was such an unobtrusive, albeit devoted glance of homage it could not discountenance the invalid, though her nerves were yet weak. He went on modestly, ‘I came to ask after you yesterday, and the day before.’

‘I know,’ responded Violet; who had heard from Rufus that Jack had been haunting the house, had asked not only once each day after

her, but morning, noon, and night. This information was, however, not elicited without some artful questions.

‘Ramsay has been here again,’ O’Brien would volunteer, while racking his brains during his frequent visits for some news to interest the patient. ‘Why did he come twice, do you say? Well, there’s nothing to do at Littleforde. I suppose he got sick of mooning about alone there, so he and I went for a turn round the kennels. What were we talking about? O—about the hounds, of course. By-the-way, he asked how you were; he wanted to know if the doctor had said anything fresh since. Old Pillbox hadn’t come when Ramsay was up here this morning.’

In this way Rufus, without knowing it, acted as Cupid’s messenger, and would have been considerably astonished had he guessed his office.

For a while, Jack and Violet talked quietly and happily together. Her hand was lying listlessly on the arm of the sofa, and somehow a larger, browner hand approached it, and presently closed over it. The spoken talk slackened

then perceptibly. Violet lay very still, but feeling a new sense of happiness stealing over her with that protecting touch; and a great deal of silent speech no doubt passed between them.

Dolly did not remark this state of affairs, or else wrongly supposed two people so quiet must be rather bored than otherwise. So, after a tour of inspection round the pretty, old-fashioned room, that was all redolent of pot-pourri of roses in big china jars, and hung with time-worn silk that only made its young mistress look all the fresher—a human flower—the child pushed herself into the disjointed murmurs of conversation.

‘We’ve dot a new game, Uncle Jack and I have, Auntie Violet.’ (Dolly called most people with whom she was intimate either aunts or uncles. In this case, the implied relationship between her two elders gave them a slight but pleasant sense of embarrassment.) ‘Uncle Jack brought me a box of choklets from London, and he gives me some at night. But first I have to say who I love best. Mother first

best, and then you best, and then him best. One night I said him best, after mother, but he wouldn't give me no choklets till I said it right.'

'And, now, one little girl I know has a naughty trick of waking up at night, and crying for Uncle Jack, just when nurse is down at supper, till she gets another chocolate. That is very bad, Dolly. I'm not coming any more,' put in Jack, with an air of grave rebuke.

All the same, the hand that lay upon Violet's smaller one pressed perceptibly tighter.

'You's naughty, too,' retorted Dolly, defiantly. 'He's a very bad boy, Auntie Violet; I'll tell *you*! Isn't it naughty to steal?' sidling close to Violet, and looking at Jack from under her lashes with roguish mischief.

'Very naughty, Dolly. But I am sure Captain Ramsay would not do such a thing. He never takes sugar or jam when nobody is looking.'

'Well, he took somefing else,' uttered Dolly, triumphantly, feeling strong in a new magisterial

capacity. 'One day, at our house, you dropped your ponky-henksy,' (anglice, handkerchief), 'and, when you went out of the room, I saw Uncle Jack put it inside his coat. I sitted under the table, and *saw him*.'

'I believe I did pick up one of yours, Miss Vyvian. I'm awfully sorry; I ought to have brought it back next day, but I suppose I forgot it,' stammered Jack, conscious of a red flush travelling over his browned features right up to his forehead; and feeling guilty of never having meant to restore that scented cobweb of lace and cambric to its lawful owner, but instead of having jealously kept it, and bestowed there-upon some secret relic-worship.

'O, it does not matter. When you remember, it will be time enough,' murmured Violet, reflecting his flush faintly.

Neither looked at each other, but Dolly, staring at them both, observed, with familiar frankness,

'Uncle Jack's got red; and now you've got red, too.'

‘I’ve brought a flower for you this morning,’ interrupted Jack, desperately ; taking a lovely orchid bloom from his button-hole, and laying it on Violet’s lap. ‘It’s pretty, isn’t it. I got it for you out of the Littleforde stovehouse. Margaret has wonderfully good flowers there, for such a little place as it is. I thought you might like it.’

‘I do, indeed. It is kind of you to think of me,’ was breathed low from between Violet’s lips.

‘Don’t you know I always do, and always shall think of you?’ came in quick response ; and Ramsay bent forward with a sudden light in his grey eyes, that seemed to touch Violet’s own with soft, responsive fire.

‘Here is Mrs. Beaumont come to see you, Violet,’ announced Mrs. O’Brien, opening the door at that moment, with a bland smile, as if giving the invalid quite the most welcome diversion possible. ‘Only, I am afraid we are rather a large party for you now, are we not?’

‘I will say good-bye,’ said Jack, springing

up. 'Good-morning, Miss Vyvian; I am very glad to have seen you.'

'Well, Dolly; are you going away with Uncle Jack, and not going to stay with mother?' called Margaret, in tones of blandishment, after her vanishing small daughter.

'Me's going to find Uncle Rufus. I want him,' called back Dolly, clutching fast hold of Jack's hand and dragging him away; evidently determined to keep one bird in hand till sure of that in the bush.

'Dolly is the greatest flirt I know,' observed Mrs. O'Brien, with a touch of sarcasm. 'She always prefers gentlemen to the company of us poor mortals. What a blessing for her, that she is still able to indulge in her very natural taste without unkind remarks being made.'

'She is very devoted to your husband; but he seems especially fond of children, he is so kind to Dolly. She likes those who like her,' was Margaret's rather cold reply. Then, turning to Violet, 'And how are you to-day, dear? Why, you are looking ever so much better—you have quite a colour, I declare. Do

you know, I've had a great disappointment this morning. I have been cherishing a pet orchid-blossom for the last three days for you ; such a beauty !' (here she gave a Latin polysyllabic name that was enough to frighten anyone but a connoisseur), 'and, would you believe it, when I went to cut it just now, it was *gone* ! Jinks either doesn't know, or won't tell what has become of it. He was in such a rage in his heart yesterday, I could see, at the mere idea of my cutting his precious flower, that I half-suspect him of having made away with it.'

Violet felt a guilty tremor. Her gaze travelled apprehensively down to the blossom that lay on her couch. Kate noticed the look, and said quietly, but with a burning upleap of jealousy in her heart she had to struggle hard not to show signs of,

'Was *that* it, by any chance ?'

'The very one,' cried Margaret, eagerly. 'Have you got one, too, in your orchid-house ? I never knew that ; and we were so proud, poor Jinks and I, of having beaten the grand manor-garden.'

‘I am so sorry, but I am afraid it is your flower!’ explained poor Violet, blushing furiously. ‘Captain Ramsay brought it. I mean he had it in his buttonhole and took it out for me.’

‘Ah, well! so long as you have it, that is all I wanted,’ was Margaret’s kindly assurance, who made haste to turn the conversation. Sweetly thick-witted though she generally was, she noticed Violet’s distressed look, and caught sight, too, of a peculiar inquiring glance shot from under Mrs. O’Brien’s dark lashes at the girl, who was somewhat powerless on her sofa to evade such scrutiny. Kindly fearful that she guessed something of the state of affairs, yet, in reality, with no idea that things had gone so far between the young people, Mrs. Beaumont burst into rapturous description of some new speckled Hamburgs she had just added to her poultry-yard. This, as she hoped, soon drove Kate from the room.

No sooner was the latter outside, than a scowl settled on her handsome face, and she clenched her white hand as she went downstairs slow-

ly, feeling as if she had received an unexpected blow.

‘ You are trying to play fast and loose with me, Master Jack. But, take care !’ she thought, vengefully to herself ; utterly unmindful that it was never Ramsay who proposed playing at the perilous game of flirtation she had lured him to take a hand in. She had blinded herself so utterly with jealousy of poor Violet ; and the wish to make a conquest of the handsome gunner had grown so much stronger from his comparative coldness ; that she herself knew not till now—and hardly even now—to what an extent her passion had grown. ‘ I am not an ill-tempered woman, as a rule, I believe,’ she went on, justifying her wrath to her own conscience, ‘ but this I will not bear quietly. I will not !—I must *do something*.’

Sick in heart with her own bitterness, Kate went on blindly, as it were, to find her husband. She felt she needed comfort, and *he* always gave it ; he always took her part. Curious that she should know she was treacherous to him in her soul, and yet seek the kindness and protect-

ing tenderness of that large-hearted man without a pang! But she did so.

Rufus was in the gun-room, handling an oily rag himself with a pucker on his broad forehead, while examining the most delicate mechanism of his gun.

‘Eh? Is that you? Don’t speak to me for a moment, there’s a good girl!’ he said absently, as Kate came up to him. Then, having satisfied himself the gun was all right, he looked up at his beautiful young wife, who stood by with a sense of the folly of others, and the injustice of things in the world’s ordering, swelling within her.

‘Why, little woman,’ he ejaculated, in pitying accents, seeing something was amiss and putting one arm round her, ‘what is the matter?’

‘Look here, Rufus,’ answered Kate, in a half-choked voice, with great angry eyes upturned full of tragic meaning to him. ‘There is some work going on between Violet and this young fellow, this Ramsay; that won’t do. It must be stopped.’

Rufus stepped back, and looked earnestly at her in amazement.

‘Why, I mean *this*, that he is making love to her, whether he cares for her or not (I don’t believe he does), and that she is so taken with him, it’s my belief unless you look out she’ll marry him—there!’ gasped Kate, the words coming out with a rush.

Rufus O’Brien gave a long whistle.

‘You don’t mean it? Come, Kitty, isn’t this your own imagination?’

‘It is not. Don’t be an idiot, Rufus. You are such a great blind owl you never can see anything unless you are shown it. What has kept him at Littleforde all this time, mooning up here every day following Violet about almost like a dog?—when there was no hunting, and he might have been enjoying himself in a hundred other places.’

‘Then he must be gone on her; and I don’t wonder at that, she’s such an awfully nice girl. If he didn’t care for her, the game would not be worth the candle, for he knows she’ll lose her fortune if she marries him. You must be wrong,

my girl, about his not caring,' reflectively uttered Rufus.

Then as Kate was silent, feeling the ground cut from under her feet in part of her statement, the good-natured giant added, with a cheerful, consolatory air,

‘Well, I’m very sorry for Ramsay, but that is his affair. And, as to Violet, we must hope she does not mind much. She would never allow herself to care for even as nice a fellow as Ramsay—and he is a thundering good chap, and the best-looking one I know into the bargain—when she knows all along what she would lose.’

‘Nonsense,’ scornfully returned Kate, with flushing cheek. ‘No woman calculates when she *really* begins to care about a man. Why, I tell you, I believe she loves him, and if she does she will throw everything to the wind for his sake.’ (In her heart the woman who spoke felt madly *she* would do so—for Jack Ramsay’s sake.)

‘And what would you have me do?’ slowly.

‘Do!—why, stop it; in some way, any way.

Get him to leave on any pretext possible. *We must prevent it.*'

O'Brien slowly shook his smooth red-haired head.

'I shall be awfully sorry if Violet does it. But still—one never knows—she may be the best judge of her own happiness. And in any case, my dear, remember it is no business of ours.'

Kate stared at him as if disbelieving her senses.

'What!' she exclaimed, 'you can stand there calmly and say that? No business of ours to see her throw herself away, give up this place and house for the sake of this new-comer! And think of us, please. If she does, where shall we be? We should have to turn out of Forde Manor pretty quickly. Where would your hunting be then—and shooting? What should I do without——?'

O'Brien drew his wife's face close to his own, so that she ceased abruptly, her last words lost in the wide neighbourhood of his big beard.

‘There! there! little woman. We have come to the real root of the matter at last. What should *we* do?—well, I’ll tell you: we should just have to do without all these good things, and make ourselves quite as happy as before we ever had them; that’s what we have got to do. Come, think a moment, dear; who are we that we should wish to spoil Violet’s happiness—or what she thinks so—for the sake of our own selfishness? You would not do it. I know you better,’ pressing, with one disengaged hand, her forehead affectionately to his lips. ‘There, give me a kiss; and tell me you will be just as happy with me again, as you were when we married and had none of these borrowed riches.’

Kate lifted her head very slowly, and dutifully obeyed.

‘I suppose you are right, Rufus,’ she said, heavily.

He little guessed what thoughts were surging under that white forehead his big hand so lovingly caressed; that his young wife silently ground her teeth together and muttered in her heart, ‘Fool—fool!’

Then, after a few unimportant remarks, she contrived to get away, to be alone and indulge her feelings. At the top of the wide, black oak staircase she paused, and looked down at the comfortable hall full of evidences of luxury, looked along the wide and sunny, pleasant corridors, hung with pictures and lined like any drawing-room with easy sofas and cabinets of china and curios.

‘To turn out of this into some dog-kennel,’ came her bitter thought. Suddenly, like a lightning-flash, followed a suggestion surely emanating from the tempting arch-fiend himself. ‘Let the girl marry this man; then all this will belong to Cyril Vyvian, *and he loves you——!*’

Kate grasped at the balusters and felt turning giddy at the thought. Then she revolted at it.

‘I could not do it!’ she said, passionately, to herself, when she somehow got into her own room. ‘I can’t give him up like that’ (him meant, alas! Jack Ramsay). ‘A man might do such a deed for sake of mere money, and many

a woman might. But I am not avaricious! I could not.'

And, poor soul! she took some pride in the thought, and even a mournful pleasure as of conscious self-sacrifice.

Meanwhile, in Violet's room, Mrs. Beaumont was saying good-bye.

'My cousin Jack leaves me, you know, in a day or two,' she cheerfully remarked. 'Just as well, perhaps, for he must not spend too long trying to catch a sunbeam, eh, dear? I hope you won't try to encourage him in it, will you, Violet? It would be such a pity for you both, you know.'

'I'll not try——' was all Violet could utter, feeling her heart turn heavy as lead.

When alone, after that friendly admonition, she wondered to herself *why* it should be such a pity for Jack. What did Margaret mean? Is it generally such a pity for a young man fairly well off, and with good prospects, as she knew Ramsay's were, to marry a girl sufficiently well-born and nice-looking, with five hundred a-year? So she puzzled herself.

The truth was, Margaret had meant nothing as to Jack; the words, 'you both,' had been said in pure nervousness.

CHAPTER XIII.

JACK'S SUGGESTION.

It was the eve of the termination of Jack's long leave, and he was one of a large party at Forde Manor that had assembled to celebrate Violet's recovery from the effects of her accident.

During the time that had elapsed since then, he had had no opportunity of again speaking to Violet anent the dearest wish of his heart ; for, on the one or two occasions he had seen the latter, Kate O'Brien had taken good care that they should have no chance of indulging in a *tête-à-tête* conversation.

The dinner had been a very pleasant one, but the hour was now late and the ladies gone to

bed. The men, however, were sitting round the billiard-room, indulging in that sort of conversation which mankind is wont to enjoy when unfettered by the presence of the gentler sex.

Hunting, shooting, the drama, &c., had all been touched on when, *à propos* of some remark about Lord Guisard (who, by-the-bye, was *not* among them, having had a well-merited rebuke given to him by Rufus the day before for over-riding hounds), old Squire Bentley observed :

‘ Well, I think the best reproof I ever heard administered to a man in the hunting-field was by a very dear friend of mine, Lord Forrardon, a master of hounds who hunted his hounds himself. We had run one fox into a largish covert, and Forrardon wanted to get him to break at the far end over a nice bit of vale. Accordingly he asked all the field to stand still, as he was doing himself. Hounds kept rattling their fox round and round the covert, but break he would not ; so Forrardon cantered down to the bottom of the wood and there found an old general, by

name Bouncer (celebrated for never riding a yard to hounds, and heading more foxes than anyone in the Hunt), sitting in the middle of a ride halloaing like mad! "He's gone back, my lord," cried the excited warrior, pointing in the direction where he had viewed the fox.

"Blank—blank—blank," came a volley of oaths from Forrardon's lips, "how the blank can any fox break with your ugly mug staring him in the face?" and away he galloped, leaving the pompous man of war nearly choking and purple with rage! Well, we eventually got our fox away, and, after a bit of a gallop, hounds threw up in a fallow field. Forrardon sat on his horse watching them make their cast, and, by Jove, it was a treat to see the way his hounds swung themselves round as they spread and tried to recover the line,' added the old man, enthusiastically. 'All the field were in a cluster behind him when up bustled the general and said, "I've hunted for forty years, my lord, and *never, no, never*, have I had to submit to such language as you have chosen to address to me to-day.'" Forrardon moved not a muscle, and

never took his eyes off the pack as he replied very quietly, "Haven't you? really! *You quite surprise me!* Huic! to Ladybird, huic together," as an old white bitch hit the line. There was a roar of laughter as we all galloped off and left the general utterly dumbfounded and speechless with rage. I don't think I ever saw a man so efficiently and quietly shut up in my life,' chuckled the squire.

'Yes, it was neat certainly,' replied Jack, 'and more effective than the liberal dose of "damson pie," your friend had favoured the general with previously. I certainly don't approve of bad language, though it is difficult to prevent oneself from using it occasionally, and if any man *has* provocation it is an M.F.H. when he sees hounds overridden, and foxes headed; but talking of good stories,' he added, 'have any of you heard the story of the Three Liars? I heard it in town the other day, and it is too good to keep to oneself, if any of you don't know it.'

A chorus of 'No, go on—let us have it,' was the reply to this question, and his audience

having lit fresh cigars, and replenished sundry long tumblers with various potions, Jack began :

‘Three men, all noted exaggerators of the truth, whom we will call A., B., and C., met in a railway-carriage, and began talking about the sport they had enjoyed. After some desultory conversation, A. said,

“‘I think, of the many seasons’ sport I have enjoyed, I never had such a good one as this last ; I never missed a single shot, and accounted for every cartridge I fired away ! nay—I did more—for somehow by practice I seemed only to have to *look* at game and to kill it ! You may hardly credit me, but, as an instance that I find it impossible to miss, I will tell you of an incident that occurred the other day. I was staying in a country-house, and one Sunday we were all walking to church across the park, when a brace of partridges rose some fifty yards from me. Instinctively, I put my walking-stick to my shoulder, and covered them, and would you believe me they both fell dead ; dead as door-nails !”

“I can quite believe it,” returned B., “for a somewhat similar, though even more extraordinary instance of the death-dealing power that attaches itself to *any* implement handled by a really good shot, happened to me. I, like you, have not missed a single shot during the last season, and killed an animal when my life was in danger under very peculiar circumstances. I was staying in Ireland, and one somewhat showery day was taking a short cut to the village post-office to send off a telegram. I had an umbrella with me which, however, was closed in the intervals between the showers. On entering a field in which some Kerry cattle were pastured, one vicious-looking cow, after glaring at me and shaking her head in a threatening manner, came straight at me! In self-defence I opened my umbrella when she was very near me. *That* saved my life, for, with a wild snort of pain and rage, she turned tail, *flew two hundred yards, towered, and fell dead!*”

A roar of laughter greeted this last story, and Rufus, exclaimed,

‘Bedad, that is a good one. I know a good deal of Kerry, and its cattle, but the “flew two hundred yards, towered, and fell dead,” certainly is delicious;’ and he went into fits of laughter.

‘Well,’ resumed Jack, ‘C. was not to be beaten; so here is his wonderful adventure.

“I was staying up in Sutherlandshire with Lord —, and one night the conversation turned on the possibility of killing a stag, five brace of grouse, and a salmon all on the same day. I professed myself equal to the task, but everyone ridiculed me. Being considerably nettled at this imputation on my sporting prowess, I had taken sundry bets on the subject amounting to a considerable sum. Day after day I attempted the task, but in vain. One day I would get a stag and a salmon, and some three brace of grouse, but toil how I might I could not *find* the other two brace to complete the bag; needless to say if I had only *seen* them I was certain of winning, for I, like both of you, never missed a shot. Another day I would get the stag and the grouse, but could not rise a

fish. Another I would get the salmon and the grouse, but in vain I searched every likely corrie and hill-side for a stag. Hinds I would see plenty of, but no stag. At length on the last day of my stay I had given up the attempt in despair, and in no very enviable frame of mind had gone out for a solitary ramble along with my rifle towards a loch in the hills, out of which the salmon river debouched. I was walking carelessly along thinking how very inconvenient it would be for me to pay all my bets, when grazing close to the edge of the loch, quite unconscious of danger, I saw a magnificent stag. To one of such experience as myself, stalking him was a matter of no great difficulty. I got within eighty yards, aimed at his shoulder, and fired my right barrel. Of course he fell over dead; but, as I fired, a gleam of silver shooting up from the placid waters of the loch some hundred yards out caught my eye; quick as thought I turned half-round and fired my left barrel at it, and the next moment, to my intense satisfaction, saw a noble salmon floating dead upon the water. I confess I was so taken aback by having per-

formed such an unprecedented feat as killing a stag and a salmon right and left, that I plumped down in the heather. Would you believe me, gentlemen, as I did so, an old hen grouse fluttered up at my feet, and, feeling I was sitting on something warm and soft, I shifted my position, and found I had *sat down on and killed a brood of ten fine young grouse!* and so won my bet. You can fancy with what astonishment I was greeted at the Lodge when I returned laden with the stag head, salmon, and grouse, and I need hardly say I was glad to lay them all down and indulge in a good long drink.”

After this Munchausen-like feat had been well laughed over, Jack resumed.

‘I have a proposition to make. Here have we been talking and telling stories about improbabilities and impossibilities, suppose we go in for some of the possibilities and realities of sport? Now, what I am going to suggest is this: as soon as the season is over, let us get up a ‘point to point’ race; one for members of the Hunt, and the other for the farmers. I’ll enter a horse and ride myself, and

give a cup to be run for by the farmers. What say you all?’

Needless to say in such a sporting community the proposal was cordially assented to, and the party there and then got out paper, pen, and ink, and resolved themselves into a committee to draw up the conditions of the races. Rufus was voted to the chair.

‘Now,’ said he, ‘as we are to have two races, one for members of the Hunt, the other for farmers and members of the yeomanry residing within the limits of the Hunt, I would propose that for both races the distance should be four miles; the course to be unflagged; no assistance to be given to the competitors. The distance from point to point to be got over as the riders please, provided they do not go a hundred yards along a road, or through a gate. To be ridden in hunting-costume. Weights thirteen stone each. Entrance five sovereigns. Post entries.’

‘Yes,’ replied Jack, ‘I think that will do, only I would suggest that the weights be divided into two classes, welters and light-weights.

Some men—Guisard, for instance—could not ride the weight, so suppose we say welter-weights to carry fourteen stone, and light-weights twelve stone seven pounds. I think that would be fairer.'

'A very good idea,' returned Rufus, 'and I'm dashed if I don't have a cut in myself for the welters, though I shall have to declare a few pounds overweight. And I tell you what, I'll get Miss Vyvian to give a cup to whoever is first past the post in both classes. I'm sure she would be delighted.'

'But how is the course to be decided?' asked one of the party.

'O, of course, everything must be regularly drawn up and settled; two people—who are not riding—must pick out the points, which will not be known until the horses go down to start. We will meet at some place or other; see the weights are all right, and then perhaps have to go a mile or two away to run the race.'

'But how about the weights for the farmers' race?' questioned Jack. 'I think it would be better to have the weights for this all equal;

for there are no very heavy men likely to enter. Suppose we say twelve stone seven pounds for them.'

'Very fair,' assented Rufus; 'and I think, now we have settled the rough outline, we should call a meeting of the Hunt, to appoint a committee and settle details. I think it will be great fun, and a capital wind-up to the season. We ought certainly to get eight or ten entries for each race.'

'I declare, I feel quite keen about it, and only wish I was young enough to ride,' said Squire Bentley, rubbing his hands with glee, and his jolly old face beaming with delight, at the prospect of seeing once more an old-fashioned bit of sport, such as he remembered in the days of his youth, before the era of flagged courses and gate-money meetings set in.

And so, the main preliminaries being settled, the party broke up.

As Jack Ramsay walked home, his thoughts were divided between a wish that he had had an opportunity of speaking to Violet and knowing his fate, and thoughts of the coming race.

Which of his horses should he ride?—Brenda or Harlequin? The former, he knew, was the faster, but then the latter was the safer fencer; and, though the mare certainly was a brilliant performer, yet in a race that depended more on cleverness and being able at a pinch to negotiate an awkward place, he thought perhaps Harlequin might have the best chance. Turning these matters over in his mind, as he walked back in the clear starlight night to Littleforde, he came to the conclusion that he would do his best to get both horses fit and in condition by the time the race was to come off, which would be in three weeks' time—not long, certainly, for thorough preparation, but quite long enough, considering they were both in thorough hunting condition; and then, at the last moment, decide which he should ride.

That night his rest was troubled by dreams of seeing Lord Guisard sailing in an easy winner, and claiming Violet as his bride (for she was to be the prize, like the Queen of Beauty in tournaments of old), whilst Harlequin stuck his feet into the ground, and resolutely refused

to budge an inch! The next morning, ere Jack departed, he told Margaret Beaumont of the proposed meeting; and she extracted (easily enough) a promise from him that he would come and stay with her for the event. Yet she sighed, adding to herself, as he drove off, ‘I wonder how all this will end. These two are getting nearer and nearer the brink each day.’

CHAPTER XIV.

THE POINT TO POINT RACE.

ALL the conditions of the Point to Point Race were settled satisfactorily. Violet, when the question had been mooted, entered *con amore* into the proposal, and promised a handsome silver cup to whosoever should be first in the two classes combined. The other conditions of the race were pretty much as had been suggested originally, except that the entrance was to be three sovereigns each. Jack had given a cup, to be run for by the farmers, and to this old Squire Bentley had added a five-pound note for the second, and a silver-mounted hunting-whip to the third. The event had caused con-

siderable excitement in the neighbourhood, and on the day of the race a crowd of carriages, horsemen, and foot-people was seen wending its way to Thornmoor Cross Roads, the appointed place of meeting. The race had filled well, and the 'correct card' showed the following entries :

Welter Weights, 14st. each.

1. Mr. O'Brien's br. mare Kate Owner
2. Mr. Blatherwick's ch. g. Solomon, Capt. Barker
3. Lord Guisard's br. g. Briggs Owner
4. Colonel Fitzroy's bay mare Flora . . . Owner
5. Mr. Brook's g. mare Gardenia Owner

Light Weights, 12st. each.

6. Miss Vyvian's g. g. Moorcock . . . Mr. Vyvian
7. Major Tomlin's bay mare Firefly . . . Owner
8. Capt. Ramsay's bay g. Harlequin . . . Owner
9. Mr. Waldron's ch. mare Chance . . . Owner
10. Mr. Leake's bl. g. Budmash . . Capt. Forbes
11. Mr. Churchill's bay g. Paddy Owner
12. Mr. Burn's g. mare Moonshine . . Mr. Johnson

Altogether a very respectable entry. It had further been decided that, in order to distinguish the two classes, the welters were to ride in black coats, and the light-weights in red.

Violet had, after all, bought the grey that had brought her to such grief, and which she had named Moorcock; and Jack, who had taken him back with him, had got the horse into a bit of condition and schooled him well. He had offered to give up entering his own horse in the race in order to steer Violet's, but to this proposal she would not listen for a moment, declaring she only entered the horse to fill up the race, and that she should back Harlequin for all the gloves she could afford to lose. Besides, her cousin had previously obtained her promise to give him the mount, and, with all his love for Violet, Jack was too keen a sportsman not to prefer riding his own horse, and such an old and tried favourite as Harlequin, to that of anyone else; so both parties were satisfied, and he was all the more pleased when Violet announced her intention to back his mount. He had with some difficulty obtained

three days' leave, and had run down on the morning of the race to Littleforde.

It was one of those treacherous days in the spring of the year for which the English climate is noted, breaking fair and bright; but towards noon the glass fell, heavy clouds came rolling up, and the wind had a decided touch of east in it that found its insidious way through the thickest of wraps and overcoats.

Three o'clock was the hour fixed for the meet at Thornmoor Cross Roads, and at that time a group of sheeted and hooded horses might have been seen walking about in an adjacent field. The line which had been previously selected by old Squire Bentley had been kept a profound secret, and no one had an inkling as to what the course was to be. Two tents were pitched in the field; one of these was reserved as a place for the competitors to dress and weigh in, whilst in the other an enterprising publican was driving a roaring trade in alcoholic and hot drinks.

A few moments before three Violet and Kate drove up enveloped in furs, and, getting out of

their carriage, walked up to a slight eminence pointed out to them by the old squire. This was immediately the signal for a rush to be made for the spot by the assembled multitude. The day which up to this had been changeable now evinced signs of a decided alteration for the worst. Biting blasts of wind came sweeping over the uplands, mingled with sheets of sleet, hail, and rain, in a way that made men turn up their coat-collars and horses curl up their backs and tuck in their tails. At length, after the inevitable delay which invariably takes place on all such occasions, Mr. Bentley got his forces marshalled, and with a ‘Now, gentlemen, follow me,’ led the way. After about a mile’s trot, he ascended a slight rise in the ground, and then thus addressed them :

‘You know the conditions of the race, gentlemen ; so all I have to do is to point out the course to you. I shall start you from the field below this. You will then make your way as best you can to Clockington church-tower out there,’ pointing in the direction where a square grey tower rose out from amid a clump of big

elms ; ‘ this you will round, leaving it on your left, and then shape your course to that flag yonder ; this you will also leave on your left, and from thence you have a straight course to the clump of fir-trees on the hill, at the base of which is the winning-post. Do you all understand quite clearly ?’

One or two of the competitors, it seemed, were not quite clear on the subject of the course ; but at last all was explained to their satisfaction, and in a blinding storm of sleet and rain they followed the old squire to the field below, from which he dispatched them, to a capital start, on their cross-country journey.

Jack had on a former occasion (a memorable one to him) traversed part of the country over which the line lay—viz., on the day when he and Violet had had such a good run, at the termination of which they had vowed eternal friendship—the friendship that had now, on his side at least, he knew, merged into love. And he had also a very vivid recollection of a certain awkward ‘ goyle ’ that lay in the line, that had proved a stopper to all save Violet and himself.

Besides being possessed of those two very necessary adjuncts for getting across country safely and well—viz., determination and a quick eye, Ramsay knew, or rather guessed, that this ‘goyle’ would have to be encountered after rounding Clockington church, and so determined to get a good start.

For the first two fields, therefore, he led, closely followed by the others, over a couple of easy-flying fences; and then a really formidable obstacle was encountered, for nearly five feet of new, stiff, solid timber frowned defiance at them. All instinctively turned aside to seek some easier outlet from the field. No, not all! Jack’s mind was made up in an instant. If he jumped this fence safely he would gain a decided lead, and be able to husband Harlequin’s strength. It was a case of neck or nothing—win or lose, and he determined to chance it, knowing that timber was Harlequin’s strong point.

As he pulled him almost into a trot, Lord Guisard, who was just behind, shouted out,

‘Fifty you don’t clear it.’

‘Done!’ called back Jack over his shoulder, adding, in mocking tones, ‘surely *you* are not afraid to follow me, my lord!’

Measuring his distance to a yard, good little Harlequin trotted up to it, then, rearing nearly bolt upright, poised himself for an instant, and bucked over clean and clear. As he landed Jack turned in his saddle, and saw Lord Guisard glowering at him in speechless rage.

‘Come on,’ he called, tauntingly; ‘if my little pony can do it, surely your three hundred guineas’ worth can;’ and, waiting no more, he galloped on.

Lord Guisard was furious. An oath rose to his lips, and he turned his horse, for he was no coward, whatever other faults he might possess; besides, he knew Violet must be an amused spectator of the scene. Down he came at the fence forty miles an hour, giving the fine hunter he rode a couple of vicious digs with the spur as he neared it. This threw the animal out of his stride, and he wisely declined. Again and again was he brought at the timber, but with a like result; at last, maddened from

pain and fright, the horse reared up, and fell back, deposited his lordship in a nice slushy puddle, luckily, however, unhurt. Briggs was up in an instant and galloped off, leaving the infuriated peer, in no very enviable frame of mind, to pursue the charming occupation of running after his horse in wet and sodden garments.

In the meantime, Jack had been going steadily on; Harlequin doing everything he was asked to perfection. When they reached Clockington Tower, Ramsay had a clear lead of three fields, and his red coat acted as a beacon to the other competitors, of which only some five had the ghost of a chance. A big double had disposed of Solomon and Budmash, whilst Gardenia, Chance, and Moonshine were hopelessly outpaced. On turning for home Jack took a pull at Harlequin and let the others up—by degrees.

A brook now confronted them, not a very formidable one, truly, but still one that many men would turn away from. Some twelve feet of open water with a bad take-off is not the

most inviting sort of fence; and water always has a deterrent effect upon human as well as equine nerves, though, given a horse that is a *really* good water-jumper, there is no more charming sensation than being carried safely over, whilst with pleasure you note your friends not so fortunately mounted either declining the venture or going plop into the stream! As they entered the field through which the brook meandered, its tortuous course plainly marked out by a line of pollard willows, Cyril Vyvian, anxious to show off, assumed the lead; but as he did so Jack said kindly to him,

‘Let me give you a lead, Vyvian; Moorcock has never cared much for water since the day he and his mistress came to grief, but he’ll follow Harlequin anywhere.’

‘Thanks, old man, I’ll follow your advice,’ was the reply, as Cyril pulled back.

And now the six put on the pace, and came thundering down at the brook, Jack leading by some three lengths, with Cyril on his right, and Rufus on his left, the others scattered on either side. Harlequin swings over in his stride,

‘describing,’ as the late Mr. Bromley-Davenport has it, ‘an entrancing parabola in the air.’ Moorcock has gained confidence, and also acquits himself well: but Rufus, poor Rufus, comes spurring along, shouting to his mare, ‘Come up, ye jade, for the honour of old Ireland, we’ll show them the——’ the word ‘trick’ being lost under water as the bank gives way and they disappear with a splash! Paddy gets over with a peck and a scramble, whilst Flora, rushing at it with her head in the air, oversprings herself and rolls over, though her owner is up and in the saddle in an instant. Firefly’s chances are here extinguished, for, stopping dead short, she shoots her rider over her head into the brook, to join Rufus in his aquatic sports. And so the four gallop on, Moorcock now leading, with Paddy lying next, Harlequin third, and, some ten lengths behind, Flora bringing up the rear.

This order they maintain for the next few fields till they round the flag. They are now getting near the ‘goyle,’ and Jack’s quick eye takes in the surrounding objects at a glance.

Yes, there is the lane where they checked by the cottage; and out of which Violet, Kate O'Brien, Pile, and himself had left the rest of the field on that memorable day, so he pulls back and lies last. Cyril evidently knows the country, and seems aware of the existence of the 'goyle,' for he bears away to the right, followed by all save Jack, who keeps straight on. As Ramsay neared the spot, he wondered if the rail-protected gap had been repaired. If it had been, he was done for; but luck always attends the bold, for, in jumping into the field, he saw the rails broken and lying much as he had left them, with only a thorny bush or two stuffed into their place. Galloping on, sensible old Harlequin seemed to remember the spot, and, pushing his way through the thorns, negotiated the place to perfection. As he gained the opposite bank Jack could see no signs of any of his opponents, but soon they hove in sight. They had now performed about three-fourths of the journey, and two sticky, ploughed fields had to be traversed in the last mile. These Jack remembered, and pulled Harlequin into a

trot as he landed in the first, jogging along a wet furrow. The fence out of this field was an easy one, but that out of the second was a truly formidable double.

As he neared it, Jack hummed to himself, in the words of the immortal bard of the chase, poor Whyte-Melville :

‘ They have pleached it strong, they have dug it wide,
They have turned the baulk with the plough ;
The horse that can cover the whole in his stride,
Is cheap at a thousand, I vow,’

adding, as he rose in his stirrups and patted Harlequin’s neck :

‘ *You* are worth more than a thousand to me, old man ; but I’m not going to ask you to cover it in your stride, though I know you’d try if I wanted you to.’

The fence was not a very high double ; still it was narrow on the top, affording but little foothold, and the old thorn and hazel fence that had grown on it for full twenty years, untouched and untrimmed, had been cut and laid in stiff and unbreakable binders. The ditches—for there were two, both wide and deep—had been dug out and

the mud piled on to the 'plushers;' in fact, it was about as awkward and treacherous a fence as could well be imagined. In the meantime, the other three riders had been brought up by a line of wire fencing that had lately been erected, and so had to diverge from their line and enter the ploughed field in which Jack was taking matters so easily. As Cyril caught sight of him he put on the pace, and, galloping diagonally across the plough-furrows, came fast at the fence just as Harlequin cantered up to it, and, quickening his pace in the last few strides, made his spring, kicked back, and landed safely in the next field.

'Don't come so fast,' shouted Jack to Cyril, but the warning was unheeded.

Moorcock's want of condition was beginning to tell, and, though he did his best, it was asking too much of a distressed horse to go fast at such a fence out of deep ground; added to which, the awkward take-off considerably increased the chance of failure. He floundered on to the top, and then the narrow bank and treacherous slimy mud gave way, and, with a

groan, he subsided backwards into the ditch as Paddy's rider, following Jack's tactics, landed safely lower down, and Flora, rushing full tilt up the furrow in Jack's wake, flew the whole thing.

The issue now lay between Harlequin, Flora, and Paddy. The latter belonged to a young fellow in the regiment quartered at Slushborough Barracks. He was a nice lad, one of Jack's friends, and a favourite with the Marshwood Vale Hunt. Only two fields intervened before the winning-post was reached, and the shouts of the spectators already rang in their ears. Jack was still leading, and as he felt Harlequin sailing along, going well within himself, he grew pretty confident of winning the light-weight race; but with Flora, who was a big, powerful mare, and evidently full of running, lying close up, he felt less sure of winning Violet's cup—the one thing he valued more than anything else. Paddy, he knew, he had the legs of, and, bar accidents, he felt sure he could beat him. He had noticed the way Flora rushed her fences, and, brilliant fencer as she

undoubtedly was, he fervently hoped this fault might yet bring her to grief.

Nor was Jack wrong in his surmise, for at the last fence but one from home—a stiff highish bank, with a bramble-covered ditch on the landing-side—the mare again overjumped herself, and came down what is vulgarly termed a ‘buster.’ This left Jack still with the lead, some twenty lengths ahead of Paddy, on whom, good honest horse though he was, the pace was beginning to tell. The last fence of all was a very trappy one—a ditch on the take-off side, and an up-jump on to a bramble and thorn-covered bank, which was thickly undermined with rabbit-holes. Harlequin jumped it to perfection, but, alas! as he landed he put his foot in a rabbit-hole and rolled over heavily, his bridle coming off in the fall. Jack, however, by constant practice had learnt to fall clear of his horse and retain hold of his reins; and as Harlequin rose, with the one rein entangled round a fore-foot, he jumped on his back, and, catching up the remaining rein, set him going just as Paddy landed safely. And now a most

exciting finish took place up the two hundred yards that remained. The run-in was up-hill, and the two were pretty evenly handicapped. Jack's only means of guiding Harlequin was with whip and leg-pressure, the bit being against his horse's chest; whilst Paddy's rider had his horse's beaten condition to contend with. Gamely the two struggled on locked together, till at last, within a few yards of the winning waggon, Jack gave Harlequin two sharp digs with the spur, and, shouting to him at the same time that Paddy swerved from sheer exhaustion, landed a winner by just a length.

Loud were the shouts that hailed his success, and many were the cries of 'Well done, captain!' from some scores of west-country yeoman throats as he pulled up preparatory to weighing out (for Jack during his stay had by his genial manner and fearless riding become a warm favourite amongst the farmers). This performance concluded, and his weight being pronounced 'all right!' by the temporary clerk of the scales, Violet came up, her face beaming

with delight and excitement. As she patted Harlequin's neck, and said, in a low tone, 'Well done, both of you !' Jack felt a thrill of pleasurable pride shoot through him such as he had never known before.

That evening, at a large dinner-party which Violet gave in honour of the event, she presented her silver cup to Jack, after making him a neat little speech, in which becoming allusion was made to Harlequin's prowess, and Ramsay's talent as a jockey. The cup being filled with champagne was, at Jack's special request, christened by Violet taking the first sip out of it ; then it was passed round among the assembled guests, who one and all drank the victor's health with ' a three times three and one cheer more,' in such a ringing chorus that made the old rafters of Forde Manor shake again, and startled the owls who haunted its ivy-clad walls.

CHAPTER XV.

‘CAN YOU ANSWER ME ONE QUESTION?’

JACK RAMSAY’S brief visit was almost over. The following day he must get back to Aldershot and exchange freedom and country life, with the still greater delight of being daily in Violet Vyvian’s society, for barracks and the monotonous routine of duty.

If he grumbled in his heart at fate, some one else was sighing in hers. How gladly Violet would have been in Mrs. Beaumont’s shoes, if only *she* might see to the proper packing of Ramsay’s big portmanteau, and have the sorrowful pleasure of handling some of his things and helping him a little. A most silly frame of

mind! Kate O'Brien, for instance, never gave herself the least chance of a headache by stooping over Rufus' shirts, when that happy-go-lucky husband of hers was away from the tender care of the Forde footmen; and he stuffed them in 'anyhow.'

Four o'clock on a mild April afternoon. Violet Vyvian is stealing—no other word expresses her shy step and tremulous feeling—through her own woods, where stray touches of Spring's passing feet might already be seen in golden patches of celandine stars underfoot, and some faintly-green buds among the brushwood.

What does she here? An heiress, her own mistress, with none to say her nay; why should she look timidly around? All the same, in spite of delicious hopes, Violet was thrilled with maiden misgivings and shamefacedness at the consciousness that, for the first time in her life, she was bound on a tryst to meet her lover. The very trees seemed to cry out reproachfully, 'What! could you leave us for this stranger? You are taking a rash step; all you see around for miles is yours—yours. Will you give it all

up for love of him?’ At the thought, the girl’s heart throbbed high, a happy smile came on her lips and lingered.

‘All!—I will give it all up for his sake,’ she repeated firmly, within herself, as she had done lately many times.

Still, she knew many people would think her foolish, even mad. And Kate O’Brien above all! Violet had an uneasy feeling that she did *not* want to meet Kate till it was all settled, and therefore had consented to this stolen interview. Perhaps it was from an idea of friendship, perhaps mere feminine jealousy, that Kate had so often thwarted Ramsay’s attempts to have any private conversation with Violet lately. But the fact was evident.

On the preceding evening Ramsay had found an opportunity to say quite low, so that only she could hear,

‘I am going away the day after to-morrow.’

‘I know,’ Violet briefly answered.

‘Let me have one last chance of meeting you; will you?’ the young man went on, forgetting his old timidity and pressing his wish

eagerly, almost bluntly. 'Will you be down at the old sundial where the three rides meet—by the pine-wood—about five o'clock, and come by yourself?'

Then, seeing Violet paused a moment or so before replying, he urged with a passionate thrill in his voice,

'You *know* there is never a chance of speaking alone with you when I come up to your house. Rufus is always about—and Mrs. O'Brien. The mistress of Forde Manor is always being wanted by everyone—may not a friend want you too? I have never yet asked many favours of you, have I? You might surely grant me this much for the last time.'

'I will come,' Violet had breathed back, very low. And here she was.

Five o'clock already, as she consulted her tiny gold hunting-watch. She was late, and there was still a fairly long stretch of grassy cross-ride through the oak-trees to be traversed before one came near the firs. Violet looked round anxiously; then, reflecting that Jack was not likely to come away from the meeting-

place, she began to run lightly and fast down the side of the ride, startling the rabbits that were playing on the sunlit, open sward, and sending them scuttling away into the bracken. At the far end the girl stopped, slightly panting; then, assuming a leisurely air out of keeping with the quickened beating of her heart, went forward sedately down another ride. The pine-trees began here; at the end could be seen a glimpse of the open triangular space where the sundial stood. But Ramsay was not in sight as yet.

Violet came very slowly indeed, with maidenly reserve, into the open. No Jack was by the old sundial, that leant crooked among the long grass; nor yet was he in sight down any ride. No figure could she descry under the pine-trees around, or where the withered bracken-stalks sparsely covered an open knoll. *Too soon!* Miss Vyvian bit her lip and felt hurt with herself. How stupid to have run! No doubt he would come in less than three minutes, but she would have preferred not being first.

Stepping back under the shelter of a near

pine-tree, Violet stood still to wait. She breathed in with enjoyment, as always, the resinous scent from the pine-branches, liked to feel the dry ground carpeted with dead fir-needles under her feet. Still that did not blind her to the fact that five, ten minutes had passed, as she several times consulted her watch.

A quarter-of-an-hour! This was strange, neglectful of Jack. Violet felt hurt with him now. Twenty minutes; five-and-twenty! Something must have happened; he had been detained; what could be wrong? Half-an-hour—Violet could bear the suspense no longer. It was cruel of Jack, almost an insult. At any rate, she would not endure such slighting conduct another instant; she should go back home.

But Violet had only turned a few yards up the homeward ride with determined face, when Jack emerged in hot haste from among the trees on the further side of the ride, a little way behind, and hastened after her.

‘Here I am—at last. Forgive me; but where are you going?’

‘I am going home, Captain Ramsay. I have an appointment with the bailiff for six o’clock, and I never like to keep anyone waiting.’

‘Don’t be so gently severe. Why won’t you look at me? Do you think for a moment I *willingly* kept you waiting?’

Violet raised her glance and saw that Jack looked heated; his breath was hurried, and moisture stood on his brow.

‘I could not get away sooner,’ went on Ramsay, excusing himself with a dogged earnestness there was no mistaking. ‘I was stopped, first of all, when I was leaving Littleforde by Margaret, who wanted my advice about something in the stables. And then, on my way here, I happened to come across somebody else; and so it went on. I have been running like a hare through the wood, and been caught by every bramble-bush in your coverts, I believe.’

‘And who was the somebody else?’ asked Violet, in a still voice.

It seemed to her—she could not have told why—that Jack was not speaking in his usual

open manner; that he was keeping something back.

‘O—only Mrs. O’Brien.’

‘What! Kate? Then of course I can quite understand you could not tear yourself away only to see me, Captain Ramsay. She is not only much handsomer, but a much more agreeable companion than I am. We are great friends, as you know; and I am never jealous.’

Nevertheless, for the first time in her life, Violet felt a surge of bitter jealousy rise up, as if it would choke her.

‘*I* do not think her a more agreeable companion. She cannot equal you in looks, in my eyes—no woman can!’

Jack looked steadfastly in the dove-like, clear eyes that met his. There was such emphasis in his low tone that, if he did not mean what he said, he must have been one of the greatest deceivers ever created. A warm, girlish flush, and a quick, feminine retort came in reply.

‘Then why did you not leave her half-an-hour ago? Kate would not detain you, I should think, if you had pleaded any excuse. I know

I should not, with a charming toss of her small, wavy, brown-haired head.

Jack bit his lip.

‘It was not easy to get away And I do not suppose you wished her to know that we were going to meet, and where.’

Then his brow darkened, and he suddenly shut his mouth tight as a trap. There was a moment’s silence. Violet could not gainsay him, but knew not what objections she could rightly make next. So they only looked at each other.

‘I am very sorry; but I really could not help it, on my honour,’ murmured Jack now, quite low, though there were only rabbits or a stray squirrel to hear him.

His grey eyes pleaded even more eloquently than his words. Few women could have withstood the dangerous proximity of that handsome, kindly face; a lover in a hundred, one to be truly proud of. Violet’s anger had already died away. She felt an influence creeping over her irresistibly that would have made her follow this man to the world’s end. Jack somehow

divined his power. He was intoxicated by the knowledge that his love of this woman—who was dear to him above all the world—had won the longed-for reward that was trembling on her lips.

‘Come here, under this tree, a little—will you, dear?’ said Jack, drawing her arm through his own very gently.

And so he led her, she following his persuasive touch, attracted by the all-powerful magnet of love, under the wide-spread branches of a great pine that stood on one side of the ride. And then——?

Well, what happened then it would be hard to say. How does fire break out first in compressed combustible materials, by self-ignition? Just as the first spark bursts into flame after smouldering, so these two—who had long guessed their mutual passion—now uttered it.

For a few minutes there was not much said that was very consecutive in speech, albeit intelligible enough, despite broken words, by the two persons in this dialogue. Then, after a pause of ecstasy, Jack found himself exclaiming :

‘Do you know, Violet, I feel ashamed of looking you in the face. Think of your position, my darling, and of mine. Could you really care more for me than for your fortune, and old home, and——’ (with a short, happy laugh) ‘for being the only lady M.F.H. I know of in England?’

‘I care far, far more,’ came the woman’s quick, low answer, uttered from the depths of her soul. ‘Oh! what would my house be to me, if the one being whom I need to live with, to see, and hear were gone away for ever? Do you think I would have much heart to ride to hounds then? What real happiness would my fortune bring me, if I never had anyone to share it with?’

Her look, as she said so, was so guileless, so open and trusting, that it gave Jack almost an awe before this pure, young woman-soul, who thus offered to give up so much of this world’s gear for sake of just—himself. He felt afraid!

‘Dear, I believe I ought never to have asked such a sacrifice from you. It might, perhaps, have been better for you if I had gone away

from Forde Manor weeks ago, and never said a word. I am not worthy of you; I am far from being as good as you think me,' he said, in a rather choked voice. 'But still——' Jack meant to say that, if life-long devotion, if the truest gratitude ever man owed woman would replace what she lost through him, then that should be hers. But he did not say so, for a sudden barking startled them both. They had been standing so close together under the wide-spreading tree, while the other pine-trees screened them on three sides, looking in each other's eyes, with Jack's arm round the girl's supple waist, that neither had given any attention as to who might be coming down the grassy ride. But Crab, Violet's pet terrier, who had followed her as usual, had been snuffling back and forward for the last few minutes between the open sward and the dead bracken-stalks under the trees in an agitated manner. And now, seeing his young mistress was still engrossed, as a faithful sentinel, he gave warning by some 'yap-yaps.'

There was the Reverend John Wood, alias

Jack, the Parson, walking quietly down the ride, and looking, with desperate interest, at the trees on the further side. Had he seen them. Of course he had; neither could doubt it! But still, his present air of not having seen being next best, the young couple, who felt terribly foolish all at once, were hesitating, when out dashed Crab recklessly, and began a noisy war-dance round the intruder's legs. It was impossible to pretend to overlook that.

Violet called Crab in a tone of the most dignified rebuke she could summon; Jack threw in his remonstrances to the terrier with a somewhat more grumpy voice. And Mr. Wood, who was as good a fellow as ever breathed, turned reluctantly to meet both lovers, who issued from under the pine-tree with as nonchalant an air as they could assume; which was not much. It was too bad of fate; too bad!

‘Ah! Miss Vyvian, how are you? I believe you asked me to come up this afternoon to show you our new plans for the school-house,’ began Jack Wood fluently, to give them time to recover themselves, and then he rushed into details of

his scheme. Violet was aghast. A week ago she had truly made the appointment; and yet she, who prided herself on being so methodical, had forgotten it entirely. She threw in a 'yes' or 'no' in secret confusion, while the young vicar hurried out his explanations; understanding next-to-nothing of what that good-natured fellow was saying, as he guessed. 'Good-bye, Miss Vyvian, I am heartily obliged to you for so kindly taking an interest in the matter. Perhaps you will allow me to come back another day and tell you more about it,' said the visitor, at the very first gate that gave him a chance of saying his adieux and bolting homewards. 'And, good-bye to you, Ramsay. You are off to-morrow, are you not? but I hope we shall very soon see you back again.' Whereupon, with a very friendly handshake, and a comical twinkle in his eye, Jack Wood made himself scarce as rapidly as possible.

The two whom he had just disturbed from the happiness of their little half-hour of Eden, could hardly help laughing as they looked after the tiresome third. And just then Miss Vyvian's

bailiff came round a corner of a copse, evidently resolved to have *his* interview, for he instantly stood stock-still.

‘It’s six o’clock, and I shall never be able to get rid of him; he is so obstinate,’ whispered Violet, in desperation.

‘What it is to be an heiress! Never mind—we have a life-time before us,’ whispered Jack. So, with a hurried promise of meeting very early on the following morning for a few last words before Jack left for Aldershot, and with a close pressure of hands, they parted. There was no more to be said with the inquisitive eyes of Violet’s bailiff upon them; an old man who had grown grey in her father’s service, and who allowed himself to admonish his young mistress if she ever showed symptoms of deferring business to pleasure.

That evening Miss Vyvian looked sweetly, if silently radiant, dreaming mostly through dinner with a smile ever-brooding on her face. But sometimes she woke up to occasional flashes of brilliancy in talk, far out-doing her ordinary self. Once or twice she looked quietly round at

the Holbeins and Knellers, all family portraits, that gazed solemn-eyed at her from the wainscoted walls of the dining-room.

‘Good-bye to you all,’ she thought, feeling ungratefully light-hearted at the prospect of parting from them. What were they, and the massive silver plate on the table, her many well-trained servants, all this dulness of wealth, as she termed it in her light-hearted gladness—what were these things worth in comparison of the great joy of being always with Jack Ramsay through life henceforth.

So, after dinner, Violet went to the piano and played to Rufus all his favourite airs, which Kate generally declined to strum as everlastingly as he liked, being sick of them, she declared, (and they were certainly rather of the street-organ kind of music). And she had a game of picquet with him afterwards, whilst Kate eyed them moodily from over a French novel, the pages of which she seldom if ever turned.

‘What a pity we haven’t Jack Ramsay and Mrs. Beaumont up for this last night,’ Rufus tentatively remarked, with a knowing smile in his

blue eyes, for with such a red forest of beard he had little room elsewhere to smile.

‘O—I don’t know. We will have them many more times, I hope,’ answered Violet, evasively, and directly felt conscious. She had not invited them yesterday to come up this evening because—she was a coward. She was not then sure of Jack, and feared he ‘meant nothing;’ the secret pain of meeting him for the last time would be greater than the pleasure. And now she was sure—quite sure! But she was selfish, and still rather rejoiced that he was down at Littleforde.

‘If I cannot have him all to myself, I don’t much care to share his society with Rufus and Kate,’ said this love-greedy young woman to herself.

‘How happy Violet looks to-night! I’ll bet a pony she and Ramsay have settled matters between them, eh, Kate?’ said Rufus later, in the seclusion of their connubial chamber, to his wife. ‘Well, I declare, I’m glad of it, though it does seem an awful pity. They’ll be the happiest couple that ever was, I believe—except ourselves.’

And feeling by the last words he had said the right thing, redeeming that well-nigh unconscious slip of the tongue—for if ever any misgivings assailed his mind as to his real happiness whenever Kate was unusually exacting, or full of the whims of a spoilt beauty, the honest fellow drove them out forthwith—Rufus soon slept the sleep of the just.

In the further gallery, Violet was almost too happy to sleep. She seemed to herself awake, yet wandering in a state of blissfulness through heavenly visions, when her door softly opened. She started up in alarm from dozing, as a candle gleamed in her bewildered eyes, and Kate O'Brien cautiously approached the bedside. Kate looked like a spirit in her white dressing-gown as, with her glorious dark hair falling down her back, and her face wearing a singularly mournful pathetic expression that softened its warmly-hued earthly beauty, she stood mutely regarding Violet from under her down-dropped eyelashes. With a foreshadowing of some coming woe, the latter half-rose and asked quietly,

‘What is wrong? Is there anything the matter?’

‘I fear so. Forgive me for disturbing you like this, but there is something heavy on my mind that I could not speak to you about, dear, before Rufus to-night—and to-morrow may be too late. He is asleep, now.’

‘Go on. What is it that would be too late to-morrow?’ said Violet, with outward calm. And yet some instinct seemed to warn her what was coming.

Kate had put down her candle, and was sitting on the side of her friend’s bed.

‘It is about Captain Ramsay,’ she said, bringing out the words with a great effort. ‘I hope—I trust I am wrong, Violet dear, but there seems to be some sort of mutual understanding between you both. We have been such friends, you and I, or I would not speak. But I am terribly afraid.’

‘There is. He has told me he loves me, and I love him in return,’ declared Violet, proudly raising her head. ‘If you wished to warn me against that, it is indeed too late. Don’t spoil my happiness by croaking over my lost fortune, Kate; I have chosen, you see! I prefer him

infinitely to any fortune—to any other man.’

‘Then you are irrevocably engaged to be married to him?’ uttered Kate, gloomily, as if murder not marriage was the subject of this midnight talk.

‘I—of course!—that is understood,’ faltered Violet, blushing up; as for the first time it occurred to her, that Jack had not after all exactly asked her in so many words to be his wife. But still——’

A sudden gleam came in Kate’s dark eyes, like a faint flicker of hope over a sea of trouble.

‘But he has not distinctly proposed, has he? To say he loves you is nothing, nothing! Why, a man will say *that* to any number of women—and certainly’ (with scathing scorn) ‘Jack Ramsay has done so to my knowledge—without dreaming of marriage.’

‘I don’t believe you! He is true and honest,’ broke in Violet, with flashing eyes. ‘He is incapable of acting dishonourably towards me, or anyone.’

‘He is not incapable of having befooled us

both,’ came in bitter answer. ‘Oh, Violet, Violet! if you have made no absolute promise, *if he has asked for none*, be warned by my fate. He may desert you in time, as he has me.’

‘You—Kate! In heaven’s name! how?’ Violet uttered, in an anguished whisper.

Kate bowed herself upon the bed and hid her beautiful face in her hands, as she bitterly answered,

‘Of course it was wrong, very wrong—but I *could not* help it. He was so handsome; with such a charm of manner! Oh, you know it all. He has made you love him, now. Well, so he did me.’

‘But, Kate—I never noticed anything. Nothing beyond a mere little flirtation now and then, that Rufus never seemed to mind.’

Poor Violet felt amazed and stupefied; she was trying dully, yet desperately, to fight in her lover’s cause. The answer came like a knell to her hopes.

‘You don’t suppose we wished Rufus, or you either, to notice it.’

A silence fell in the room. Both young

women sat shivering on the bed, with different feelings, but equal misery of mind.

Violet felt a stony despair settling down upon her. Her tongue seemed tied; she *could* not ask her friend the questions that were trembling on her tongue. Kate was sick in soul at her own baseness; shivering guiltily lest, after all, it might fail. She writhed her body with horror at the thought—at what Jack would think of her if ever he came to know.

‘I don’t say, Violet, that he may not love you now. Of course you are very nice-looking; and, after all, five hundred a-year is not so bad,’ she faintly murmured. ‘It is only, dear, that the change seems just—just a little sudden. He ought to have been quite sure he was off with the old love, before he was on with the new!’ (with a faint laugh). ‘It was only this very afternoon that he met me and said good-bye. Perhaps he met *you*, too.’

Violet could not speak. Her heart seemed overcharged with gall, as she remembered—ah! only too well—Jack’s strangeness of manner when he confessed to being delayed by meeting

Kate. His late kisses seemed to blister her face as she sat there rigid, and looked down at the woman crouched before her in self-abasement.

Kate spoke feebly again, with a ghastly mirth against herself.

‘What a fool you must think me, dear! You will be able to laugh with him some day at how I believed all his sweet speeches. And you may be very happy, I daresay—unless he changes once more. It’s only the way of the world, my dear; you’ll get used to it.’

‘I do not know much of the ways of the world in love-making, but I shall never get used to *that*,’ said poor Violet, truthfully, her proud, virgin soul recoiling at the thought that *her* lover could come straight from the woman he had beguiled to meet her honest eyes, to claim her fresh, first love.

After a while—it seemed somewhat a long while—Violet nerved herself to utter, in solemn appeal,

‘Kate! can you answer me just one question? I will ask no more. Was there anything that passed between you and Captain Ramsay lately

—anything (not on your part, but on his) that ought, in honour, to have prevented him from trying to gain my affection too? I must—I will take your word for it.’

Kate O’Brien shuddered. The temptation was so awful. Jack’s honest face rose before her eyes; this girl’s trustful friendship demanded equal fair-dealing, and yet—— The man was so handsome; she loved him with all the passion of a violent, selfish nature. She remembered how, that very afternoon, Jack had almost roughly repulsed her when she waylaid his steps; he had left her with abruptness, rudeness—as she angrily declared to herself—in order, as she now knew, to seek a farewell interview with Violet.

Kate’s face blanched; her very lips turned ashy as, in a stifled voice, she whispered, ‘*Yes.*’

Then she turned and crept away, leaving Violet alone.

END OF THE FIRST VOLUME.

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